

STUDY GUIDE: BASIC CHARACTERISTICS OF EMILY DICKINSON'S POETRY:

(Dr. S. Coghill © 1986)

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886): Below is some of the basic information regarding themes, ideas and images in Dickinson's poetry. Also included is some information about her poetic "vocabulary" as well as her creative output.

The standard academic website for Dickinson Studies is for The International Emily Dickinson Society, and can be found at:

[Emily Dickinson International Society](#)

For teachers at all levels: [Teaching Emily Dickinson](#) , [Emily Dickinson Electronic Archives](#) and [The Emily Dickinson Lexicon](#)

On a lighter note, and with a "wit" Dickinson might have appreciated, you can go to the Dickinson random epigram generator at:

[The Emily Dickinson Random Epigram Machine](#)

CONTENT – THEMES – IMAGERY

1. – power of poetry to transform
 – limits of the poetic vision & limits of human abilities
2. – the nature of poetry itself and the nature of the poet
 – attempt to find "the miraculous in the common (Emerson's idea)
3. – "truth-telling"
 – "renunciation" and retreat into intensity
 – loss, grief, death (all metaphors for loss/death of "spirit")
 – psychological poet – writer of the depths of human spirit
 – her poems of death rank among the best in the English language
 – the brevity of revelation and transcendence –
4. – tension of immortality/mortality
 – temporality of human life
 – triviality of human existence

5. – intense love poems, especially in periods of anguish; to ED, love is the "identifying emotion" – a person is not a he or she but an "it" until "it" has loved
 – poetry as prayer
 6. – poems as metaphors of the psychological & spiritual experience her poetry/experience of the spiritual transcends the confining strictures of orthodox religion
 7. – moods range from melancholy to ecstasy (her "ecstatic" poems are comparable to poems by other mystics and "ecstatic" poets; grief to joy; leaden despair to spiritual intoxication; often coy, sentimental, yet never pious.
 8. – common subject matter: nature (over 500 poems) friendship, death, love, beauty, immortality;
 – we see a struggle for sanity: internal pain, anguish, fear, tension, depression and recovery (terms for psychotic state of mind)
 – religious vocabulary drawn from Congregational/Calvinistic doctrine used to discuss "spirituality" rather than "theology"
 – her sensibility was such that she rebelled early in life against the Calvinism in Amherst in general, and against the Congregational church of her family in particular. But she always retained a Calvinistic tendency to look intensely inward and a Calvinistic sense of inherent but terrible beauty along side the frightening coldness of the world. She perceives the harmonious relationship of Nature as a whole. Her vision always reflects that with the sweetness of life comes bitter sweetness – and that no moment lasts forever. Her poems record instants of "now" made "forever."
 9. – startling, meaningful, juxtapositioning of imagery; yoking of disparate images; anticipates this popularity of metaphysical poetry in 20th century (E.E. Cummings, W. Carlos Williams).
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FORM AND STRUCTURE OF HER VERSE

1. Few radical innovations to verse forms and she rarely uses free verse.
2. Memorable opening and closing lines – "to stun".
3. Recurring use of dashes – exactitude; to make reader ponder word and phrase, causing reflection & intensity; slows reader, calls attention

away from sing-song rhythms (dominant of the time) toward language and association.

4. Wrenched grammar & syntax: omission of articles, prepositions, articles, auxiliary verbs to create a highly condensed poetry (condensation) – deletions occur so often that almost no poem is without a sudden absence of connective language:

"A Wonderful – to
Feel the Sun."

"It is a wonderful thing within the soul to feel the Sun."

50% reduction/condensation of words.

5. Startling, meaningful juxtaposition of imagery; yoking of disparate images anticipates popularity of metaphysical poetry in 20th cent.
 6. Riddles & nursery rhyme-like qualities: pure delight and play in language for its own sake.
 7. Meter: when not truncated or "gnomic," it becomes the meter of the common Protestant hymn books, the "plain song"
 - meters derived from hymns: Isaac Watts' Christian Psalmody & Psalms: Hymns and Spiritual Songs. These books were in her house. They described and outlined the many meters common to hymns and songs – named each meter & suitability for each metrical form. Majority of ED's poems written in "common meter":
 - Common meter: 4 line stanzas, 3-4 feet per line (ballad stanza)
 - Long meter: all lines have 4 feet
 - Short meter: 2 lines of 3 feet, 1 line of 4 feet, 1 line 3ft
 - use of trochaic/- and dactylic /meters/ many variations with these structures. 8/6 syllable lines.
 - use of: approximate rime, slant rime, off-rime, false rime, suspended rime – led Higginson to believe readers might think she's a poor rime, since most readers of the time believed a good poet wrote good, exact rimes.
 - assonance & consonance used to create "sonorous" phrases
 - the "I" in poems not necessarily ED. Use of "persona" or a "supposed person." Use of both male & female persona.
 - personification used a great deal – animates and is animating
 - The "key" to Emily Dickinson is metaphor: she may possess one of the most metaphorical minds we have ever witnessed.
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EMILY DIKCINSON'S POETIC VOCABULARY

Beyond common pronouns, articles, and adjectives, ED used favorite words in her poetic vocabulary. Here's a short list indicating frequency of favorite words in her 1775 poems:

170: sun
141: death, face
130: god, time
125: soul
124: heart
121: night
106: love
102: bird
94: die
88: eyes
86: bee, home
82: light
77: sky

Dividing the number of poems (1775) by the frequency of a word used, we can get an average number of poems where these words appear. For example, only about every 12th poem is about death or at least has death in its vocabulary. The majority average use imagery of light or invoke light and related words for the sun.

CHRONOLOGICAL SEQUENCE OF POEMS AND THEIR DATE OF COMPOSITION

Date & No. per Yr.	Poem # (Standard edition, Johnson)
1850-1	1
1851-1	2
1852-1	3
1853-1	4
1854-1	5
1858-51	6-57
1859-93	58-151
1860-64	152-216
1861-81+3	217-298
<u>1862-365+2</u>	299-664
1863-142	665-807
1864-173	808-981
1865-184	982-1066
1866-36+1	1067-1103

1867-9	1104-1113
1868-21	1114-1135
1869-16	1136-1152
1870-23+3	1153-1176
1871-27	1177-1204
1872-37	1205-1242
1873-49	1243-1292
1874-38+1	1293-1331
1875-19	1332-1351
1876-37+1	1352-1389
1877-41	1390-1431
1878-20+3	1432-1452
1879-29+1	1453-1482
1880-25	1483-1508
1881-27+2	1509-1536
1882-22+1	1537-1559
1883-33+2	1560-1593
1884-42	1594-1636
1885-9	1637-1646
1886-2	1647-1648
Undated	1649-1775

About 20 poems are exceptions to the chronological sequence of poem numbers which Thomas Johnson discovered after his 1955 edition of ED's poems was published. The above table is based upon Thomas Johnson's edition of *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, which is the standard edition of ED's poems. All editions of ED's poems usually follow Johnson.

Here's another way to look at Ed's creative output:

1850-1854= 5 poems
 1858-1861= 292 poems
1862-1865= 856 poems
 1866-1886= 622 poems

Nearly 50% of ED's poems were written in a 4 yr. period, 1861-1865, marking one of the most creative periods in the life of any artist or writer.

Though it is difficult to examine ED's development in "stages," as we do other writer's work, critics do see some characteristics in the 3 different periods in her writing, though certainly these characteristics overlap:

A. Prior to 1861: poems are conventional, sentimental, yet ED escapes the maudlin sentimentality of the popular poetry of the day; the poems lack intensity & urgency of the later poems; no

"anguish"; poems lack the shorthand and condensation of later poems; more reflective than intense.

B. 1861-1865: most creative period, mature poems, filled with tension & urgency; metaphysical strength; intensity of religious doubts; reflect anxiety.

1866-1886: a period of declining health; many poems reflect a pessimism and hopelessness in solving the "riddle" of life; cynicism brought on by losses of those close to her (though she was no cynic like later Mark Twain) .

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT EMILY DICKINSON

General Information And Frequently Asked Questions About Emily Dickinson's Life And Poetry

By Dr. S. Coghill 2005

1. What did Dickinson mean by "circumference"?

Significance for Dickinson: In a late letter, Dickinson writes, "The Bible dealt with the Center, not with the Circumference." Earlier, in a letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson (2 July 1862), she had said, "My Business is Circumference."

Definitions: Circumference: Derived from the Latin root meaning "to carry or go around," this word's emphasis is on the sense of encompassing all.

Albert Gelpi observes in *Emily Dickinson: The Mind of the Poet*: "Emily Dickinson's most frequent metaphor for ecstasy was Circumference. Each of the negotiations which consciousness conducted between the *me* and the *not me* established a circumference. . . . The circle had long been a symbol for the spirit in activity" (121). Circumference is a double metaphor, signifying both extension and limit. "Circumference comes to serve as a complex symbol for those disrupted moments when in some sense time transcends time. . . [It is] an indispensable defense perimeter which separates man from God" (Gelpi).

Typically, Dickinson connected this concept with feelings of awe and the sublime; the sublime has an element of fear or terror mingled with aesthetic perception.

2. What kind of meter did Dickinson write in, and why did she use it?

Common Meter or Hymn Meter

Definition: A closed poetic quatrain, rhyming A B A B, in which iambic tetrameter alternate with iambic trimeter. Common meter is distinguished from ballad meter by its rhyme scheme: the rhyme scheme of ballad meter is X A X A.

Derivation: This meter derives from English Hymnology and uses predominantly iambic or trochaic feet (sometimes dactylic).

Types Of Meter Dickinson Commonly Used Include:

Common meter: alternately 8 and 6 syllables to the line: 8/6/8/6

Long meter: 8 syllables to the line 8/8/8/8 (this tends to get monotonous)

Short meter: two lines of 6 syllables, followed by one of 8, then one of 6: 6/6/8/6. The first, second, and fourth lines are in iambic tri-meter, and the third is in iambic tetrameter. Examples: "A Bird came down the walk," "The bustle in a House," and "There's a certain Slant of light."

Sevens and sixes: 7/6/7/6

Common particular meter: 8/8/6/8/8/6

Short particular meter: 6/6/8/6/6/8

Source: Isaac Watts's *Christian Psalmody, or, The Psalms*. Watts always names the meter, and introductions set forth what effects may be achieved by each type.

Dickinson's Use of Hymns According to Martha England, her hymns differed from Watts's in these ways: greater use of enjambment greater metrical freedom use of more images with no scriptural source

Dickinson used the bee, a favorite symbol of Watts's, as a defiant counter-emblem to his hymns. Her bees are irresponsible (138, 1343), enjoy la dolce vita (1627), and are pictured as seducers, traitors, buccaneers (81, 128, 134, 206, etc.).

Every poem composed before 1861 is fashioned in one of the hymn meters above. Largest proportion in common meter.

Second largest proportion in common particular meter.

3. Why does Emily Dickinson use the dash?

- To indicate interruption or abrupt shift in thought.
- As a parenthetical device for emphasis.
- As a substitute for the colon: introducing a list, series, or final appositive.
- To keep a note of uncertainty or undecidability. Dashes are fluid and indicate incompleteness, a way of being in uncertainty (like Keats's negative capability). Dashes mark without cutting off meaning.

The dash both joins sentences so that they have a boundary in common and resists that joining: it connects and separates.

Its traditional use is informal, and it is used often in women's writing: see, for example, Queen Victoria's letters or diaries. It is a falling away, an indefinite rather than a definite end to a line.

Some critics have argued that the upward or downward movement of the dashes signifies elocutionary marks to guide readers on how the passage should be read or phrased.

4. Why did she capitalize so many words?

German, a language Dickinson knew, typically capitalizes nouns. Capitalizing words gives additional emphasis.

Some critics (Habegger) believe that her use is at times idiosyncratic and more random than meaningful, since in some instances a word is capitalized in one of Dickinson's handwritten copies of a poem but not in another of her copies.

Capitalization should, of course, be considered very carefully if the copies are consistent or if, as is usually

the case, the poet has seen the manuscript through to publication.

5. What kinds of poems did she write?

According to William Shullenberger and Sharon Cameron, Emily Dickinson has characteristically stunning or startling ways of opening poems:

Stunning or Startling Opening Examples:

"Pain has an element of blank.

"This was a Poet--It is that

"Longing is like the Seed"

Riddles, some with lack of specific referents for pronouns.

"I like to see it lap the miles"

"A narrow fellow in the grass"

Declarations: "I'm wife--I've finished that"

Additional

- Landscape descriptions.
- Tales, parables, allegories
- Requests
- Complaints
- Confessions
- Prayers

Sharon Cameron notes that "definition can be a way of coming to terms with a discrepancy between what one believes and what one feels" (201).

- Some poems repeat without elaborating on initial name
- Some poems bring up and dismiss complex situations
- In some poems, the context and conclusion may bear little relationship to each other.
- Some raise definitions to point out the speaker's knowledge of its inadequacy.

6. How should we read Dickinson's poetry?

Speaker. Who is the speaker? What person (first, second, third) is ED speaking in? If it is the first person plural, with whom has she aligned herself? To whom is the poem addressed?

Setting or Situation. What is the setting? Real? Abstract? What about the situation? Is there action in the poem? What is it?

What are the verbs? What is their tense? Their mood (indicative, subjunctive, interrogative)? In what ways does their syntax vary from what you expect? Are any of them archaic or unusual?

What is the form of the poem? Closed? Open? What is the meter? the rhyme scheme? Where does ED depart from these patterns and forms? Why?

What elements are repeated? Inverted? Why? What instances of repetition does she use? What is the effect of the repetition?

What figures of speech does the poem contain? metaphor? metonymy? synecdoche? personification? extended metaphor? What kind of figure does she use as a comparison (vehicle)? Where has she used this before and with what kinds of meaning or resonance?

What kinds of images does she use? olfactory? tactile? visual? auditory? thermal? Characteristic Dickinson images include patterns of light/dark, bee/flower, mind/body, life/death. Do these occur here? In what combination?

Does the poem have an effective, striking, or climactic moment? Does it come to some kind of resolution? What kind? What recognition does the speaker's persona achieve, or does the poem chronicle simple description and observation?

Tone. What is the tone of the whole? Solemn? Playful? Irreverent? Mournful? Objective? What is Dickinson trying to convey?

What Tradition Seems Invoked? In what ways does she allude to other works or poetic traditions? (Metaphysical poetry, Philosophical, Meditations)? In what ways might this poem be an "answer" to another author?

Rhetorical figures. Where does Dickinson use paradox? hyperbole? anaphora? apostrophe? litotes? Why does she use them?

For additional reference see: [Interesting Fun Facts About Emily Dickinson](#)

ADDITIONAL EMILY DICKINSON RESOURCES

Since the 1890 edition of Poems ed. by M. L. Todd, many editions of ED's poetry have been published. The best, most comprehensive edition to date is:

- 1955: THE POEMS OF EMILY DICKINSON, 3 vols. "Including all variant readings critically compared with all known manuscripts," ed. by Thomas H. Johnson. *Also consult Franklin's '98 edition since he re-numbers a few of the poems somewhat differently*
- 1958: THE LETTERS OF EMILY DICKINSON, 3 vols., ed. Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward. The standard edition of ED's letters.
- 1974: THE LIFE OF EMILY DICKINSON, 2 vols.; 1980. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. by Richard B. Sewall (This is the most accessible and readable standard, biography to date). Can also be found in a one volume paperback edition.
- 1987: EMILY DICKINSON, by Cynthia Griffin Wolff. New York, Alfred A. Knopf. This is a biography that treats both Dickinson's life and work.

- 1998: THE POEMS OF EMILY DICKINSON: VARIORUM EDITION,
3 vols. Ed. R.W. Franklin. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. Cambridge, Mass.
- 1996: EMILY DICKINSON: A COLLECTION OF CRITICAL ESSAYS, edited by Judith Farr. New Jersey, Prentice Hall.
- 1998: THE EMILY DICKINSON ENCYCLOPEDIA, edited by Jane Donahue Eberwein. Connecticut, Greenwood Press.
- 1998: THE EMILY DICKINSON HANDBOOK, edited by Gudrun Grabher, Roland Hagenbuchle and Cristanne Miller. Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press.
- 1998: THE POEMS OF EMILY DICKINSON: VARIORUM EDITION, edited by R.W. Franklin. Cambridge, Massachusetts. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- 1999: THE POEMS OF EMILY DICKINSON: READING EDITION, edited by R.W. Franklin. Cambridge, Massachusetts, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- 2001: THE DICKINSONS OF AMHERST: PHOTOGRAPHS BY JEROME LEIBLING. Includes essays by Christopher Benfey, Polly Longworth and Barton Levi St. Armand. Hanover, University Press of New England.
- 2001: MY WARS ARE LAID AWAY IN BOOKS: THE LIFE OF EMILY DICKINSON, by Alfred Habegger. New York, Random House. The most recent biography

CHRONOLOGY OF EMILY DICKINSON

- 1830 Born, December 10, in Amherst, Massachusetts.
- 1840 Enters Amherst Academy; withdrew several times due to severe homesickness and ill health, but finally graduated in 1847.
- 1844 Visits relatives in Boston, Cambridge, Worcester in May and June.

- 1847-48 Attends Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, South Hadley, Massachusetts. Sits for daguerreotype at Mt. Holyoke.
- 1849 Ben Newton leaves Amherst.
- 1850 Valentine to George Gould, "Awake ye muses nine, sing me a strain divine," published, Amherst College Indicator, in February.
- 1851 Visits her brother Austin in Boston, Mass.
Melville's MOBY-DICK published.
- 1852 SPRINGFIELD REPUBLICAN publishes Emily's "Sic Transit" valentine.
- 1853 Visits in Springfield, Mass.
- 1855 Visits Washington, D. C., and Philadelphia.
Whitman's LEAVES OF GRASS published.
- 1856 Emily's bread wins 2nd prize at Agricultural Fair
- 1857 Emerson lectures in Amherst, on December 16, and visits the Austin Dickinsons.
- 1860 Charles Wadsworth calls upon Emily.
- 1861 Visits Middletown, Connecticut.
REPUBLICAN publishes ED's poem "I taste a liquor never brewed," under title "The May-Wine."
- 1862 First writes to Thomas Wentworth Higginson asking for literary advice.
REPUBLICAN PRINTS "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers"
First letter & 4 poems sent to Higginson.
- 1864 Travels to Boston, for eye treatments.
In New York, ROUND TABLE print's ED's poem "Some keep the Sabbath going to church," and "Blazing in gold, quenching in purple."
- 1866 REPUBLICAN PRINTS ED's "A narrow fellow in the grass."
- 1870 Higginson visits Emily Dickinson in Amherst, August 17.
- 1873 Higginson makes a second and final visit, December 3rd.
- 1874 Father, Edward Dickinson dies in Boston.
- 1876 Helen Hunt Jackson asks Emily Dickinson to contribute to A Masque of Poets.
- 1878 Article in Springfield Daily Republican suggests Emily Dickinson as collaborator on the "Saxe Holm" stories with Helen Hunt Jackson.
- 1882 Mother (nee' Emily Norcross of Monson, Mass.) dies.
- 1883 Thomas Niles asks Emily Dickinson to submit a volume of poems for publication.
- 1884 Emily has first attack of illness – "revenge of the nerves."
- 1886 Emily Dickinson dies, May 15, in Amherst.
- 1890 Poems by Emily Dickinson, First Series, edited by T. W. Higginson and Mabel Loomis Todd. 11 editions by the end of 1892.

- 1891 Poems by Emily Dickinson, Second Series, edited by T. W. Higginson and Mabel Loomis Todd.
- 1894 Letters of Emily Dickinson edited by Mabel Loomis Todd,
- 1896 Poems by Emily Dickinson, Third Series, edited by Mabel Loomis Todd.

INFLUENCES ON EMILY DICKINSON'S POETRY
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Useful Web Links for Dickinson Scholarship:

1. The Emily Dickinson International Society:

<http://www.cwru.edu/affil/edis/edisindex.html>

2. The Emily Dickinson Electronic Archives:

<http://www.iath.virginia.edu/dickinson/>

WHO WAS EMILY DICKINSON INFLUENCED BY?

By and large, when scholars talk about *who influenced* Emily Dickinson, they look at the books she had in her own library, and the writers she referred to in her Letters (which was rare), extant journal & diary accounts of those who knew her to whom she mentioned authors she enjoyed reading, and to elliptical references or discernable stylistic parallels in her own writing. Given Dickinson's originality and genius, the list is fairly short.

British Writers	American Writers
King James Bible	Anne Bradstreet
George Herbert	Edward Taylor
John Donne	Jonathan Edwards
Shakespeare	Ralph Waldo Emerson & Transcendentalism
Sir Thomas Brown's <i>Religio Medici</i>	Henry Wadsworth Longfellow
Issac Watts (18th C. Psalmist)	William Ellery Channing
George Eliot	Ike Marvell
Charlotte Bronte	
Elizabeth Barret Browning	

There is some contemporary scholarship that explores this issue, though much of it is speculative. Two of the better discussions are Richard Sewall's biography of Dickinson, in which, toward the end he has an informative chapter titled Books and Reading. More recently, Gary Lee Stonum (who currently edits the *Emily Dickinson Journal*) has a Chapter on Dickinson's Literary Background in the *Emily Dickinson Handbook* (see essay below).

Sources and for further reading include:

Bain, Robert, Ed. *Whitman's & Dickinson's Contemporaries*. Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 1996.

Eberwein, Jane Donahue, Ed. *An Emily Dickinson Encyclopedia*. Wesport, Connecticut, Greenwood Press, 1998.

Franklin, R.W. Ed. *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Variorum Edition*. Cambridge, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998.

Grabner, Gudrun, Miller, Christanne & Hagenbuehle, Roland, Eds. *The Emily Dickinson Handbook*. Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press, 1998.

Habegger, Alfred. *My Wars Are Laid Away in Books: The Life of Emily Dickinson*. New York, Random House, 2001.

Johnson, Thomas H. Ed. *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, New York, Little, Brown and Company, 1960.

_____ with Theodora Ward, Eds. *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*.
Cambridge, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1960.

Leyda, Jay. *The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson*, 2 Vols. New Haven, Connecticut, Yale University Press, 1960.

Lowenbourg, Carlton, *Emily Dickinson's Textbooks*. Lafayette, California, 1986.

Sewall, Richard B. *The Life of Emily Dickinson*. New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980

Wolf, Cynthia Griffin. *Emily Dickinson*. New York, Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc., 1980.

GARY LEE STONUM: from *The Emily Dickinson Handbook* @1998

Dickinson's Literary Background

At the center of any serious investigation of Emily Dickinson's poetry, as Cynthia Griffin Wolff has noted, is the problem of context. Not only do we know relatively little about the intentions, inspirations, and constraints shaping Dickinson's literary career, but the poems regularly challenge us to imagine backgrounds they conspicuously fail to specify. Poem after poem seems to avoid some "circumstance too well known to be repeated to the initiate," so we the uninitiated keep trying to invent or reconstruct contexts that will remedy the omission (Leyda I: xxi).

The question of context most often gets raised biographically, in the hope that recovering the private circumstances of the poet's life will anchor the poetry in referentiality. Context is a cultural and historical problem as well, for like any body of writing Dickinson's emerges from a network of symbolic practices and takes many of its possibilities of meaning from this array. The hope here is that if only we could properly identify and describe the cultural milieu we could more securely understand the poetry and better appreciate Dickinson's achievement. Unfortunately, biographical criticism has more often amplified disagreements about Dickinson's writing than dissipated them, and research into the cultural contexts of her work has likewise reproduced rather than resolved disputes about how best to read it. At its best, rather than answering interpretive questions, historical study typically reconfigures the stage on which they get posed.

CHALLENGES

The biographical critic's difficulties stem in part from a lack of documentation: Lavinia Dickinson burned Emily's papers after her sister died; only a small portion of the poet's apparently voluminous correspondence has survived and been located; and we have relatively little testimony from those who knew her, especially by contrast to writers of the time who led more public lives. The difficulties of specifically cultural contextualization begin with the same lack. We would certainly like to glean more information about the literary roles Dickinson imagined for herself, about the books she and her circle of friends admired or scorned, and about the references, allusions, and sayings they might have taken as starting points. Actually we do know more about these matters than about, say, the poet's erotic life. The further

difficulty stems from her poetry's careful singularity, which both coaxes and frustrates a search for explanatory contexts.

The same singularity defines the boundaries of our search. Consider Dickinson's insistence on uniqueness in an 1862 letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson. Apparently fearful he would suspect her of plagiarism, she wrote that "I marked a line in One Verse — because I met it after I made it — and never consciously touch a paint, mixed by another person — I do not let go it, because it is mine" (L271). The remark indicates a determination to avoid all literary indebtedness, especially stylistic, and it thus specifically disavows one familiar kind of context.

True to her word, with the exception of a few openly allusive poems, Dickinson does successfully conceal whatever immediate textual sources and inspirations her poetry might have. Her "Lay this Laurel on the One" (PI 393), a four-line redaction of the seven stanzas composing Higginson's "Decoration," would be unrecognizable as such if we did not know from their letters that his elegy was a source. We would be equally in the dark about the quatrain's origin in Dickinson's grief over her father's death, which had happened three years before. How many other poems arise from comparable but now unrecoverable contexts? We do not know and for the most part can only mark our ignorance as one boundary of the determinable backgrounds for her work. Dickinson's 1862 letter also implicitly indicates the other boundary, namely, the broad literary values and ideals shaping her work. By claiming the marked line as inalienable property and in assuming that originality is requisite, Dickinson pledges allegiance to a pair of romanticism's central tenets (Woodmansee 3555). That is, at the very moment Dickinson insists upon the singularity of her poetry and hence its distance from all contexts, she allies herself to an established, historically specific definition of poetry as the creation of singular genius. On the other hand, romanticism can be such a broad concept, not to mention a disputed one, as to be of limited use in establishing a context for Dickinson's writing. Even the insistence upon originality presupposes a historicism otherwise strikingly absent from her writing.

Books and reading were Dickinson's primary access to a world beyond Amherst. We can thus at least be reasonably confident that the cultural contexts of Dickinson's writing are primarily literary, particularly if that term is defined inclusively. Her surviving letters are filled with references to favorite authors, and some of the poems allude in one way or another to recognizable elements of her reading (Pollak, "Allusions"). To be sure, she is by no means a learned poet in the vein of Milton or Pope, writers who can hardly be appreciated without understanding their allusions and allegiances. Yet she is also surely not the unlettered author Richard Chase once unguardedly deemed her, uninfluenced by literary sources in either style or thought.

A few cautions need to be kept in mind as we examine various claims about Dickinson's literary milieu. First, we know very little about how or even whether Dickinson imagined her work as participating in any public enterprise. By contrast to a Keats, who dreamed of being among the English poets after death, or a James Joyce, who schemed tirelessly to shape his own reputation, Dickinson hardly trafficked in any cultural arena. We do possess information about the books she read or admired, and we know from the persistent testimony of her letters and poems that she regarded poetry as an exalted calling. Yet, although we can reasonably infer from this a certain broad ambition, we simply do not know if Dickinson regarded her vocation as entailing some sense of a role in literary history or as obliging her to bargain in the cultural marketplace. We do not, for example, know whether or in what respect she regarded herself as a woman poet, in spite of a number of lively arguments supposing that she did.

Indeed, because Dickinson showed so little interest in the cultural position her work might occupy, even the most credible claims about her filiations usually testify as much to the critic's context as to the poet's. Forty years ago, for example, when New Criticism held the fort and T.S. Eliot's praise of the metaphysical poets heavily influenced Anglo-American literary taste, scholars regularly identified Donne, Herbert, and Vaughan as her important predecessors. By 1980, however, the ascendancy of poststructuralist theory in the United States had brought with it a keener appreciation of the major English romantics, and for a brief time Wordsworth and Keats were regarded as exemplars of the tradition from which Dickinson sprang. More recently and resoundingly, as feminist theory has called attention to a distinctively women's literature, critics have looked to nineteenth-century American and English women writers as Dickinson's sources and inspirations.

1. Evidence can be found to support all these claims. Two stanzas copied from George Herbert's "Matins" were found among Dickinson's papers and even mistaken for a time as her own composition (Bingham, *Home* 571-73). Likewise, Dickinson's letters make it clear that she eagerly followed the careers of several female contemporaries, particularly Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Yet evidence that Dickinson had some familiarity with another writer's work should not be confused with confirmation that the work is a significant context for her own. Indeed, we should probably distinguish two sorts of context, the writerly and the readerly. To reconstruct a writerly or compositional context would be to delineate the origins of particular texts and the circumstances in which they were written. As with "Lay this Laurel on the One," historical evidence is crucial to such a task. To construct a readerly or interpretive context, on the other hand, would be to set the work in telling relation to literary or cultural tradition. Historical evidence can be suggestive, but it is rarely conclusive or even obligatory. A similarity to Christina Rossetti, say, can thus be mildly illuminating, even though Dickinson seems to have had no acquaintance whatsoever with the English poet (Leder and Abbott).

At the writerly end of the spectrum lie the sources Dickinson drew upon or referred to as she wrote, which are of varying importance. Dickinson's regard for Elizabeth Barrett Browning makes it likely that her "Vision of Poets" is a source of "I died for Beauty" (P449), as well as or even rather than Keats's now more famous "Ode on a Grecian Urn." On the other hand, the identification is by no means crucial to an understanding of the poem.

2. The more interesting cases are those in which the source is disputed and identification would make some difference to our reading. Dickinson was notably fond of exotic place-names, most of which she must have come upon in her reading and some of which may carry thematic associations. The reference to "Chimborazo" in "Love—thou art high" (P4s3) may well derive incidentally from Edward Hitchcock's *Elemental Geology*, where it stands among a list of the world's tallest mountains, or it may originate from similarly casual uses in Barrett Browning and Emerson. On the other hand, if we heed Judith Farr's investigations into the influence of contemporary painting, then we might recall that Frederic Church's mammoth painting of Chimborazo was one of the most celebrated luminist canvases of the day ("Disclosing" 73-74). If the poem is read in the latter context, then the "Love" addressed by the poem as like the mountain would function more insistently as a figure of sublime theopany. (The poem also clearly alludes to Exodus 33, the chief biblical commonplace for such an event.)

3. Likewise, two equally *recherche* possibilities have been identified for the source of "The Malay took the Pearl" (P4s2), each linking the poem to different parts of Dickinson's work. Theodora Ward proposes Robert Browning's *Pnracelsus* and along with Jack Capps associates the poem with others using the image of diving for pearls (Ward 61-63; Capps, *Readi1lg* 8g-go). Farr nominates De Quincey's *Confessionals of English Opium* 7-2 Entel; which would corroborate her reading of the poem as representing Emily's rivalry with Austin over the affections of Susan (Passiol7 I48). Farr's case is helped by our knowledge that Dickinson tried to obtain a copy of *Confessionals* in 1858 and that the book may be found in the family library (Capps 8 I -8~).

In addition to supporting this or that interpretation of a poem, writerly contexts can themselves become a starting point for interpretation. According to Martha Dickenson Bianchi, three portraits hung in her Aunt Emily's room (*Life* 83). Two are of writers we know from other sources that she admired greatly: Elizabeth Barrett Browning and George Eliot.

4. That the other is Thomas Carlyle, whom she never mentions, may suggest that he, too, helped shape her literary imagination. On the relatively slender basis of this clue, my own work has stressed an affinity between Carlyle's *Heroes and Hero worship* and Dickinson's "This was a Poet" (P448). The claim is highly speculative, and its validity no doubt depends less on the historical evidence (itself from a somewhat unreliable source) than on the explanatory power gained from linking Dickinson and Carlyle.

5. On the other end of the spectrum are readerly or interpretive contexts, which must be judged entirely on explanatory power. Consider as an extreme example George Whicher's otherwise admirable biography from 1938. Whicher is one of the few early critics to notice Dickinson's comic writing, which he links to the raucous, largely populist strand of American humor challenged in the thirties by Constance Roarke. We may smile today at the thought of placing Dickinson next to her contemporary Mark Twain (both clad in white, of course), but the very unlikeliness calls attention to the grossness of comparison. The association

does serve an interest, even an ideological program. Seeing Dickinson as a Yankee humorist distances her poetry from the conservative and patrician social milieu in which she lived her entire life, and it gives her a place of some pride in the Popular Front vision of American literary history. Yet unbuttoned humor seems alien to the preponderately psychological and metaphysical orientation of many Dickinson poems, so Whicher's argument ultimately calls more attention to differences than to resemblances.

Although Whicher has not persuaded many readers, his proposal is also neither illigtemate nor different in kind from more winning claims. It is an act of assimilating, and the test of such acts is whether they help us understand and evaluate the appropriated material. As Dickinson herself affirms, we see comparatively, and the very visibility of Dickinson's work partly depends upon our seeing it in comparison to some context. Moreover, such comparisons are also always a form of judgment. Whicher clearly values the thought that Dickinson's poetry participates in the progressive social and intellectual format of her day, and his commentary singles out for attention and admiration those aspects of her work that do so participate.

6. Our information about Emily Dickinson's reading comes from a finite body of documents, and most of it can now be found conveniently in a handful of collections and studies. The vast majority of the references in her own poetry are helpfully annotated and indexed in Thomas Johnson's 1955 edition of the Poems. Although Johnson's edition has come under criticism for its typographic representation of her manuscripts and for its confident separation of poems from correspondence, these complaints do not apply to his identification of the names, places, tags, and quotations in her verse. The letters are a richer source of information about Dickinson's reading, and here too Johnson's edition is essential, although not as fully annotated as the Poems. Of the handful of documents by and about Dickinson that have turned up in subsequent years, the most important for conveying a sense of her cultural milieu are the Lyman Letters, which Richard Sewall has edited.

7. Many of the references in Dickinson's writings are discussed in Jack Capps's indispensable *Emily Dickinson's Reading*, which includes a detailed index of the books and authors she mentions in poems or letters. Capps also surveys the contents of the family library, much of which is now at Harvard. Unfortunately, the usefulness of the library "is limited by the fact that books from the Austin Dickinson and Edward Dickinson household have been mixed and, in most cases, dates of acquisition and individual ownership are uncertain" (8). Likewise, although these volumes include inscriptions, marginalia, and other evidence of use, few of the markings can be confidently traced to the poet herself.

Capps describes a number of suggestive facts about the library, noting for example that of a three-volume Works of Thomas Browne belonging to Susan the only cut pages are those containing "Religio Medici" and "Christian Morals." This casts doubt on Emily's avowal to Higginson that Browne was one of her favorites. In one of her earliest letters to him she had written that "For Poets—I have Keats—and Mr and Mrs Browning. For Prose—Mr Ruskin—Sir Thomas Browne—and the Revelations" (L271). The account may be more polite than accurate. Several of the writers she names were singled out for praise in Higginson's Atlantic Monthly essay, "Letter to a Young Contributor," the occasion of her writing to him in the first place.

Capps's account of the Dickinson library is not meant to be exhaustive, but one can find various additional remarks about marked passages and well-thumbed pages in the writings of others who have used the Harvard archive. In addition to Capps, the richest accounts are Sewall's biography and the books written by Ruth Miller and Judith Farr.

A brief but tantalizing account of the periodical literature Dickinson read is available from Joan Kirkby. In "Dickinson Reading," Springfield Republican and the Hampshire and Franklin Express.

Capps also briefly lists the textbooks in use at Mount Holyoke during Dickinson's time there. The list is substantially amplified by the Carlton Lowenberg's *Emily Dickinson's Textbooks*, which interprets its subject broadly, including hymnals and devotional writings in the family library as well as the authors and texts Emily may have encountered at Amherst Academy and Mount Holyoke Seminary. Lowenberg also describes the markings in books belonging to the Dickinsons, including those in a number of volumes not retained in the Harvard Collection.

8. The other most important record of primary sources is Jay Leyda's remarkable *Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson*, which excerpts in chronological order and impressive array of letters and diaries of the Dickinsons, newspapers and magazines available to the family, and various public and private writings by those in and around their world. In some respects his book is a more useful introduction to the poet's life than either of the two best biographies. Whereas Sewall and Wolff both properly give organized interpretations of her world, Leyda offers something more like raw materials.

9. A number of anecdotes and recollections have been preserved by Dickinson's family, friends, and early editors. Such reports, which may be found scattered throughout the works of Martha Dickinson Bianchi and Millicent Todd Bingham, need to be used with some care. However, no one has actually challenged Bianchi's account of the three portraits or questioned Susan's attribution to Emily of this remark about Emerson: "It was as if he had come from where dreams are born" (Leyda 2: 35 1 -52). Of special although uncertain significance for Dickinson's literary milieu is an essay by Bianchi, which provides our only listing of books said to have been kept on the mantel of Emily's room: *Ranthorpe*, *The Mill on the Floss*, *The Imitation of Christ*, *Abelard and Heloise*, *The Life of Jean Paul*, and *The Last Days of Byron and Shelley*. Bianchi's essay included as an appendix to *Barton Levi St. Armand's Emily Dickinson and Her Culture*.

10. One additional source deserves special mention. Dickinson seems to have made frequent and extensive use of Noah Webster's *American Dictionary of the English Language* in writing her poems, harkening not only to definitions but to etymologies (sometimes dubious ones) and illustrative quotations. It therefore matters considerably which of the considerably different versions she consulted. The scholarly consensus is for (an 1844 reprint of) the 1841 edition, rather than the 1828 edition (also in the Dickinson library), and for any of the ones dated 1847 or later (Buckingham). Although reprinted several times, the 1841 edition is relatively rare. Students of Dickinson are thus likely to welcome the annotated reconstruction of her lexicon being prepared under the direction of Cynthia Hallen.

CONTEXTS

11. The extant claims about Dickinson's readerly and writerly filiations divide roughly but conveniently into three areas: Jacobean literature, including Shakespeare, the King James Bible, and some of the metaphysical poets; New England culture from the Puritans up through such contemporaries as Emerson; and nineteenth-century English literature from Wordsworth to the Brownings. Overlapping the last two but also possibly a distinct category for Dickinson were the English and American women who were Dickinson's immediate predecessors and peers. Dickinson herself might not have recognized any of the categories, we should keep in mind. Unlike most other writers of the time, Dickinson did not hold a historicist view of literature, or at least left no record of doing so.

11. Jack Capps has proposed that Dickinson showed little interest in literature not written in English and also that she did not pay much attention even to English literature prior to Shakespeare. The observation needs some qualification. Dickinson studied both French and Latin in school, and as Vivian Pollak notes, classical mythology contributes the second-largest group of fictive characters mentioned in her writings. Likewise, George Monteiro has argued for the influence of the sixteenth-century Portuguese poet Luis Vaz de Camões, whom Dickinson would have encountered from reading Elizabeth Barrett Browning. In addition, it is possible that Dickinson shared somewhat in the romantic medievalism of her day and so may have cared more about earlier literature than Capps suspects. Farr and St. Armand both make cases for an affinity with Pre-Raphaelitism, for example.

Nevertheless, Capps's view largely holds. The Greek and Latin references are almost all proverbial, and Dickinson was surely far less interested in foreign or historically remote cultures than most of her peers. One further omission is notable. Although morally respectable authors from the Restoration and afterward were staples of her school curriculum, Dickinson makes conspicuously few references to Milton, Cowper, Pope, Johnson, Young, Thomson, or Goldsmith (R. Sewall, *Life* 349-53). The only eighteenth-century writer arguably to have influenced her is Isaac Watts, whose hymns have often been seen as the main source of her prosody. However, besides a fondness for odd rhymes and numerous examples of common meter and its kin, Watts seems at most to have contributed an occasional point of rhetorical departure or a target for parody. For a recent, measured view on this subject, consult Judy Jo Small's *Positive as Sound*, which qualifies the influential claim of Martha Winburn England.

12. The difference between readerly and writerly looms largest in discussions of Dickinson's seventeenth-century predecessors. A prime example of readerly claims, the once commonplace link with the metaphysicals, is based chiefly on similarities of style and subject. Following the lead of numerous earlier reviewers and critics, Judith Farr (writing then as Judith Banzer) has concluded that Dickinson resembles Donne, Herbert, and their successors in favoring abrupt or startling opening lines, epigrammatic forms, and unusually concise or elliptical expressions. Her "Before I got my eye put out" can thus be compared with Herbert's "I struck the board, and cried, No more," and her "To disappear enhances" with Donne's frequently paradoxical and riddling conceits. The resemblance appears the stronger when Dickinson is set against her contemporaries, and indeed the similarity is often emphasized as a way of advocating the superiority of Dickinson's style to Victorian lushness and fluency.

The intense and highly personal religious concerns in much of Dickinson's poetry have also been seen as a link to the seventeenth century, regarded as the font of English devotional and meditative verse (Martz). In this, however, she differs less from her American contemporaries, especially the Victorian writers of England and America most likely to be scorned by

advocates of the seventeenth century. One issue in the relative importance of these two contexts is the stress on intellectual and pointedly antisentimental meditations; to like a look of agony or to declare that the admirations and contempts of time show justest through an open tomb is thus arguably to exhibit a metaphysical sensibility. On the other hand, much of Dickinson's religious verse resembles the sentimental consolation verse of her day in emphasizing the pathos of death and the pain of separation from loved ones.

Although Dickinson clearly had some acquaintance with Herbert and Vaughan and probably also knew a bit about Donne and others, the evidence suggests that her awareness would have come too late and been too casual to have actively influenced her own art. Such at least is the conclusion of Ruth Miller, based on examining dates and markings in the Dickinson family library and investigating references to seventeenth-century poetry in the newspapers and periodicals read by Emily. Most of the sources date from the 1860s, by which time her mature style was fully formed and her characteristic themes and attitudes well established.

13. By contrast, the evidence is considerable for the writerly impact of the King James Bible and of Shakespeare on Dickinson's writing. The Bible is by far the text most frequently quoted or referred to in her poetry, albeit not quite as a literary source. (Fordyce Bennett's Reference Guide provides poem-by poem list of scriptural echoes and allusions.)

The Bible is also the main source for what Ruth Miller calls Dickinson's reply poems, texts staged as a rejoinder to some other text. Sewall cites the following example in his biography:

"And with what body do they come?" –
Then they do come – Rejoice
What Door – What Hour – Run – run – My Soul
Illuminate the House!

"Body!" Then real – a Face and Eyes –
To know that it is them! –
Paul knew the Man that knew the News –
He passed through Bethlehem – (Pl492)

Like most reply poems, this one quotes the source text conspicuously. Oddly, but also typical of her reply poems in this respect, this poem is known to us only for having been sent in a letter; it is not to be found among the fascicles. In quite different ways, both features suggest Dickinson's care that her reader recognize the staging. She both supplies the reference and addresses the poem to a known audience, upon whose understanding she can presumably rely.

Although only a handful of poems can unmistakably be identified as replies, others may also originate more covertly as responses to a particular source. Noting the playful allusiveness in much of Dickinson's correspondence, for example, Richard Sewall has suggested that parts of a favorite text and even single words regularly served as a stimulus to her imagination. His suggestion exemplifies the frequent suspicion that many of Dickinson's poems stem from sources we are unable to identify, sources as likely to be textual as biographical and possibly to be both at once.

14. Like reply poems, the many references in Dickinson's letters to Dickens, George Eliot, and most of all Shakespeare presuppose a shared and often also what is obviously a mutually cherished context. Early on they seem a badge of group identity. The regular recourse to Donald G. Mitchell's *Reveries of a Bachelor* in letters to girlhood friends suggests, for example, that Ik Marvel (Mitchell's pen name) served her circle as a source of erotic and probably also parentally disreputable pleasures of the imagination. Well beyond adolescence, in addition, literary references proliferate in letters to many of Dickinson's correspondents, and they also have been taken as signs of a special relation to her audience.

The most fully argued case concerns the Shakespearean tags and allusions that proliferate in letters between the poet and her sister-in-law and also in the poems that Emily sent to Susan. In line with similar observations by Rebecca Patterson and Paula Bemlett, Judith Farr has proposed that references to the plays, particularly Antony and Cleopatra, served Emily and Susan as a code language (Patterson, *Imagery*; Bennett, "Orient"). The single word "Egypt," as in Antony's "Egypt, thou knew'st too well," could thus invoke the entire passion of the play's principals, and it could call up an identification of Emily as Antony and Susan as Cleopatra.

Shakespeare is not the only candidate for such a private lexicon. Farr makes a similar claim about Jane Eyre as a source for the Master letters and as a code used in writing to Samuel Bowles (whom Farr identifies as the addressee of the Master letters). Likewise, St. Armand proposes;¹¹ "Veiled Ladies" that Bettina von Arnim's *Die Gunderode* (in Margaret Fuller's 1842 translation) played a comparable role in correspondence with Susan and that Dickens and Shakespeare both served that function in letters to Bowles and later to Judge Lord.

Another aspect of the Shakespearean references, second in number only to the Bible but confined mainly to letters, points to a different kind of literary model. Dickinson never refers to the sonnets, though in their

lyric and seemingly confessional mode and their frequent recourse to a shadowy but coherent erotic narrative those poems might seem to resemble many of Dickinson's. Likewise, she refers sparingly to the histories, comedies, and romances, although the last two genres might be thought to have the same kind of appeal and also to attract Dickinson's attention by their wit and wordplay, activities at which Dickinson also excels. Dickinson's evident bardolatry – "While Shakespeare remains literature is firm" (L368) – is of another sort, however. She attends overwhelmingly to the tragedies, referring primarily to characters and dramatic speeches rather than to theme or style. Dickinson may thus have admired Shakespeare most for what Keats called his negative capability, the art coming from the embodiment of character more than sheer verbal skill or a capacity to express the poet's own thoughts and feelings. When Dickinson protests to Higginson that it is not she but a representative of the verse who speaks in the poems, we may suspect her of staking out some privacy from what otherwise are revealingly personal poems. But Dickinson's admiration for Shakespeare suggests the appeal of role playing and hence a fondness for representing characters other than her own.

Whereas the seventeenth century is a context Dickinson would have had to search out or select, New England is one she would have had difficulty avoiding, so the task for her readers and critics is to specify which aspects are most important or illuminating. Except for a common and often unspoken assumption that Dickinson is a quintessentially American writer, by which is usually meant a quintessentially New England writer, opinions differ about what her countrymen meant to her and which of them loomed the largest. Earlier cultural histories stressed the importance of a Puritan intellectual and religious heritage but were usually unable to locate particular influences. More recently critics have paid attention to the popular literature of the times, especially by women. Dickinson knew this literature quite well, as her letters make clear. In addition, from the beginning a debate has raged about the importance to Dickinson of Emerson and Emersonianism.

14. Dickinson lived all her life in the Connecticut Valley, a stronghold of uncompromising Calvinism and the site during her formative years of the last great religious revivals in New England. Although she ultimately resisted conversion and although she showed no special interest in reading devotional texts, she seems nevertheless to have been well schooled in the New England mind by the sermons she heard and by the influence of family, friends, and teachers. Questions of faith get explored in Dickinson's poetry against a background of three divergent sources: the older Puritanism lingering in conservative Amherst, the liberalizing and rationalizing trends of Enlightenment thought that culminated in Emersonian transcendentalism, and a sentimental or domestic religiosity that arose during Dickinson's own lifetime.

I find that the surest guide to the first two sources is Karl Keller, who offers separate, detailed comparisons with Anne Bradstreet, Edward Taylor, and Jonathon Edwards and a canny critique of the frequent emphasis on Emerson's importance. Keller argues that as a whole Puritanism chiefly supplied to Dickinson a mythic framework within which poetic and existential dramas could be staged. The most important plank in the scaffolding is that value and meaning are to be discovered by scrutinizing the soul; real life is within. The importance of introspection is, of course, a cliché about New England culture, in that it supposedly links together everyone from Cotton Mather to Wallace Stevens. The cliché takes on considerable force in Dickinson's writing, however, since she arguably privileges interiority to a greater and more exclusive degree than any American poet. Moreover, her corresponding inattention to social and historical externalities distinguishes her from another important line of American writing that also descends from Puritanism. Unlike the New England writing that Sacvan Bercovitch has recently much emphasized, Dickinson does not identify the soul's fate with a national destiny. She writes no jeremiads.

Instead, Dickinson couples introspection with a more specifically religious doctrine, namely, the ontological gap between man and God and the absolute importance of this divide. In numerous poems the difference between time and eternity or earth and heaven is precisely what makes a difference, that is, makes meaning and makes the concerns of her poetry meaningful. According to Calvinism, one more feature of the same scene is that God is above all the source of judgment, however much divinity may also be associated with charity, grace, wisdom, and so forth. Dickinson, too, never abjures this possibility, although she also entertains other opinions about divine justice and sovereignty.

Although she evinces a keen respect for human intellect, especially her own, Dickinson seems true to her Connecticut Valley roots in resisting the confidence in human reason that gave rise to Unitarianism and other liberalizing trends. However, many of her poems about nature take seriously the collateral

Emersonian belief that one can and should read the landscape for signs of transcendental truth. Not only are there sermons in stones, but we are equipped to hear them, at least some of the time. As the Wordsworthian tag indicates, Emerson is not the only source of this romantic tenet, but he was certainly the dominant voice in the United States and he is clearly the father in this respect of the nature writings of Thoreau and Higginson, which Dickinson seems to have read appreciatively.

In a great many Dickinson poems rehearsing a number of different views, the most urgent religious and existential issues are reasonably well defined by the distance between Connecticut Valley dread and Concord enthusiasm that Dickinson at least knew of the latter is undeniable. She was given a copy of Emerson's *Poems* in 1853, and she writes approvingly of Representative Men. On the other hand, she neglected meeting him in 1857 when he lectured in Amherst and then spent the night next door at Austin and Susan's house. More strikingly, none of their several mutual literary acquaintances seemed to have shown any of her poems to him.

Emerson and Dickinson both care a great deal about the soul's access to supernal power and to a transcendent state of being, and she often joins him in demanding such a boon. On the other hand, for every poem in which she imagines herself as a debauchee of dew, there is another in which she represents such rapture as an earthly paradise that too competes with heaven. In other words, she regularly imagines rivalry and conflicting motives in the soul's traffic with the divine, whereas Emerson is prone to emphasize continuity and harmony.

The relation with Emerson and the Puritan past is one emphasized in American studies by what must now be regarded as the old consensus. That school of thinking has been challenged in converging ways by feminist critics and by historical scholars such as St. Armand. Both newer approaches stress Dickinson's immersion in the popular culture of her time and her fondness for at least some of its once scorned motifs. Next to the highbrow tradition running from Edwards to Emerson, for example, St. Armand juxtaposes the literature of what he calls a Sentimental Love Religion, which is primarily a construct of the women of Victorian America. He thus notes that a number of Dickinson's lyrics presuppose as background some version of the widely popular narratives in which "death, love, the afterlife, nature and art are all bound in fealty to the great idea of romance" (Culture 80). Such narratives are both literally and metaphorically operative, serving commonly as the plots for actual libretti and finding a place in numerous popular novels of the day.

Several aspects of this literature obviously resonate with a number of Dickinson's poems. One key motif is that of separated, banned, or otherwise star-crossed lovers, who often can hope only for reunion after death. Another is the centrality of deathbed scenes and of a sentimental rhetoric of consolation, which is especially important to the verse of the time. It has long been obvious that many of Dickinson's poems both draw upon such mortuary verse and also importantly depart from it. Now that such poetry is again being read with some respect for its historical valences, it should become possible to sort out Dickinson's relation to this work and compare the influence more judiciously to sterner Puritan notions about death and dying.

A third aspect of such literature stresses religion's material comforts, imagining heaven as a well-furnished house in which the self can feel at home. This is the aspect that most diverges from Puritanism, with its more disembodied theology and its emphasis on the perils of damnation over the promises of salvation. It is also the most significantly gendered aspect, Puritanism representing a harsh, masculine tradition against the feminized religion of the heart. Dickinson's relation to the materialist aspect of sentimentality remains a subject open to investigation. A comparison between home and heaven is clearly crucial to Dickinson, but it is less likely that she shares the Biedermeier sensibility of an Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, St. Armand's chief exemplar of material domesticity.

Joining St. Armand in decrying the tendency to dwell too exclusively on highbrow culture are both David Reynolds, who links Dickinson to the themes of the sensation fiction of the 1840's and 1850's, and a number of feminist scholars who stress Dickinson's kinship with the once much-lamented women poets of the century. The important claims here go beyond similarities of theme and imagery to the possibility that women's poetry differed in kind and genre from nineteenth-century poetry by men. Cheryl Walker offers the richest discussion so far of this claim, singling out such categories as verse fantasies of power, poems that on the other side identify with powerlessness and abjection, and poems that imagine some sanctuary for the sensitive or threatened soul. Above all, she notes, women's poetry stresses feeling and sensibility over

thought or fact, largely exemplifying in this respect the culture's separation between men's and women's spheres.

15. American literature seems more a source of intellectual and thematic contexts for Dickinson than of specifically literary inspirations and challenges. Dickinson's gnomic style sufficiently resembles Emerson's that when published anonymously one of her poems was misidentified as his. Yet, except for one redaction of William Ellery Channing (PIZ34), and early references to Bryant (PI3I) and Longfellow (P:84), Dickinson does not invoke American authors in her verse. The case for the specifically literary influence of American literature comes more from the models it may have provided for her imaginative and artistic life. Richard Sewall, for example, explores in some detail the possible influence on Dickinson's imagination of Longfellow's *Kavanagh* and Mitchell's *Reveries*.

16. Pursuing a similar topic in a different fashion, Joanne Dobson examines how Dickinson's ardent but invisible literary identity figures against both the careers of other women writers of the time and the models of female selfhood available in their writing. Partly stressing the code of reticence to which women were expected to adhere, Dobson also makes it clear that many women either transgressed it or found ways to mitigate it. The result is to modify the picture of Dickinson as rebel and nonconformist that is usually derived from her obvious stylistic and intellectual daring. Dobson portrays Dickinson, in her reluctance about publication and publicity, as largely acquiescing to an orthodoxy against which others often struggled.

17. In *New England Literary Culture* Lawrence Buell also portrays Dickinson's literary identity as more conventional than others have seen. He first acknowledges her stylistic and rhetorical obliqueness, then notes that it can and has been equally well explained as resulting from two different forms of ambivalence on her part, one about Puritan theology and the other about the ideology of true womanhood in Victorian America. In either case the result is that Dickinson is torn between private passion and established morality, and in this she is said importantly to resemble Longfellow, Lowell, and other middlebrow poets of her region. Buell accordingly portrays her as an especially telling representative of New England culture rather than an idiosyncratic exception to its main patterns.

One drawback of Buell's argument is that it would apply equally well to most English writers of the time, and indeed he acknowledges at one point that a regional focus risks blinding the critic to larger patterns. More generally, the silently nationalist bias of much Dickinson criticism may similarly limit the visibility of larger contexts. Dickinson herself was no respecter of frontiers. Perhaps conspicuously, she never echoes one of the resounding commonplaces of antebellum culture, namely, the importance of establishing a distinctively American literature. Although recent scholarship has stressed the forgotten American writers, particularly women, whom Dickinson would have learned from, thereby correcting an undue stress on Emerson, Whitman, and other male standards, Dickinson herself expressed the greatest enthusiasm for English writers, many of them female contemporaries, and seemed otherwise wholly indifferent to the cultural nationalism prevalent in her day.

More specifically, she admired the writers of her day (the Brownings, the Brontës) who most clearly carried forward the idealistic program of English romanticism. I have elsewhere argued that Dickinson felt an allegiance to the poetry of sensation, which begins with Keats and Shelley and continues with such "spasmodics" as Elizabeth Barrett Browning and the early Tennyson. This is a school contrasted in Victorian England with the poetry of reflection, deriving from Wordsworth and perhaps finding its culmination in Arnold's criticism. More generally, Sewall observes that at a fundamental level "her sense of self had Romantic origins, rebellious at first, developing into a kind of heroic individualism," and that she had a "Romantic sensitivity to Nature" (*Life* 714).

On the other hand, she makes few references to the major romantic poets, and the one full-scale study of her relation to English romanticism, Joanne Feit Diehl's, is obliged to posit rather than demonstrate the connection. Indeed, Diehl's work depends upon the notably ahistorical and context-indifferent poetics developed by Harold Bloom. It is, in other words, another readerly appropriation, in which the detailed comparison of "Frost at Midnight" and "The Frost was never seen" depends for its value on mutually illuminating the two poems and not on the hunch that Dickinson's poem is a reply to Coleridge's.

Furthermore, in her own references to nineteenth-century English literature Dickinson more often expressed enthusiasm about novels and novelists than about poetry, the more so if we regard Browning's *Aurora Leigh* as essentially a novel in verse. Dickinson refers usually to the characters rather than to phrasings, plot, settings, and so on. Gilbert and Gubar accordingly argue that these characters offer broad models for the personae in her poems. Moreover, Dickinson's references to the characters are of a piece with her abundant interest in the writers' biographies. As Margaret Homans observes, Dickinson seems to have grouped both real and fictional characters under the category of "exemplary lives" (*Women Writers* 164). The pattern may thus further confirm Dickinson's greater interest in imagining character than in expressing the self. On the other hand, exemplary lives may chiefly be models for oneself; Homans's point is that Dickinson looked especially to other women writers for examples of literary identity.

18. Except for one telling phrase commemorating Elizabeth Barrett Browning (P312) and another that praises Helen Hunt Jackson, perhaps dutifully and politely (L368), Dickinson does not actually single out women writers as a category, nor does she ever explicitly identify her own situation as that of a woman writer. On the other hand, the issue of female authorship was so widely debated in her day that Dickinson could hardly have been unaware of it. Moreover, even if the issue plays an uncertain role as a compositional context, it emphatically dominates recent interpretive contexts. Much contemporary criticism reads Dickinson symptomatically, as inevitably expressing the situation of the woman writer although not necessarily thematizing it.

In addition to the otherwise separable contexts that can briefly be designated as poetry by American women and novels by English women, two cases can be made for gender as a context that crosses borders and genres. Paula Bennett makes the most forceful claim for the first: "Dickinson's definition of herself as woman poet was . . . rooted in her positive feelings for women. If, with the exception of Jackson, Dickinson never mentions American women poets by name, she nevertheless saw herself as part of a female literary tradition which she and they shared. British in origin, this tradition had found its richest, most complicated, expression in the work of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, the Brontë sisters, and George Eliot" (*Woman Poet* 1415). According to this view the American divide between a sentimental religion of the heart and a Puritan religion of the head is for Dickinson chiefly a dispute between gynocentric and androcentric notions of selfhood. As such, it links up with the social and erotic issues faced by such as *Aurora Leigh* and Jane Eyre.

The other case, which I find more suggestive, depends on contemporary theories about the gendering of language and meaning. According to such a perspective, which is best represented by the work of Diehl, Homans, and Loeffelholz, Dickinson draws her "unique power from her particular way of understanding her femininity" (*Homans, Women Writers* 171). However, both this argument and the more specific one that she adheres to a nonreferential language, one which she and her culture would have regarded as female, stand at some distance from historically verifiable claims about Dickinson's sources and background.

EMILY DICKINSON AND THE TRANSCENDENTALISTS

<p><u>EMILY DICKINSON AND TRANSCENDENTALISM</u> S. COGHILL @ 1996</p>

USEFUL WEBSITES:

1. Emily Dickinson:

Scholarly sources

[Emily Dickinson International Society](#)

[Emily Dickinson Electronic Archives](#)

Non-Scholarly source: [Emily Dickinson Random Epigram Generator](#)

2. Walt Whitman Project:

<http://jefferson.village.Virginia.EDU/whitman/>

Transcendentalist Web:

<http://www.vcu/engweb/transweb/>

Transcendentalism:

- 1. A Movement of philosophical ideals, a special kind of Romanticism that reached its heights in New England in the 1840s.**
- 2. It reacted against eighteenth-century empiricism and asserted the supremacy of mind over matter, defending intuition as the guide to truth.**
- 3. However, Transcendentalists did not produce a systematic philosophical system. But they did stand for self expression, American ideas of individualism, self-reliance, the worth of common humanity, the equality of races and sexes, and the interdependence of the natural world and its human inhabitants.**
- 4. It also combined anti-formalism with an interest in Oriental mysticism.**
- 5. Since the Transcendentalists believed that the senses can recognize only representations or symbols, they valued consciousness over experience [or history]. For them Nature is benevolent and compassionate toward the individual, permitting us to use it for its profit and instruction and allowing us to read its innermost meanings.**
- 6. Nature will yield its spiritual significance to the perceptive observer who can pursue and rise above its symbolic clues--and thus come face to face with Nature's cause ("God" or the Oversoul).**

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) grew up with these Transcendental ideas and never wholly discarded them, although, by 1862, when she started to write her

major poetry, Transcendentalism had declined considerably. Until then, writers like Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne and Melville had all asserted the existence of a transcendent reality and had deemed it the task of literature to reveal this higher realm. However, Realism, which followed Romanticism, was more concerned with everyday experience.

Dickinson wrote in between those two traditions. She read the works of the leading Transcendentalists (including some Theodore Parker and William Ellery Channing), and it seems that she had already absorbed the movement's central features by the early 1850s. Both Thomas Wentworth Higginson (editor of the *Springfield Republican* and later Dickinson's editor) and Austin Dickinson (her brother, in his younger years) were strongly influenced by the movement.

Dickinson was reading Emerson's work—particularly his essays—as early as the mid-1840s, and many scholars believe him to have been a major influence on her. Emerson's *Poems* (1846), given to Dickinson by her father's law student Benjamin Newton around Christmas 1849, used rhyme and meter in innovative ways. Dickinson called these poems "immortal," and she labeled his *Representative Men* (1850) "a little Granite Book you can lean upon" (L481).

She marked her copies of Emerson's *The Conduct of Life* (1861, 1879), *Essays* (1861), *May-Day* (1867), and *Society and Solitude* (1879). Whether she attended any of the lectures Emerson gave in Amherst in 1855, 1857, 1865, and 1879 cannot be determined.

, but she certainly knew of their content. On the occasion of his 1857 lecture Emerson stayed with Austin and Sue Dickinson* in the house next door to where Emily was living. She wrote to Sue. "It must have been as if he had come from where dreams are born!" (PF10). During the last years of her life Dickinson copied out several scraps of Emerson's verse, something she did very rarely for any of her favorite poets. She enclosed the phrase "Tumultuous privacy of storm" from Emerson's "*The Snow Storm*" in a letter that Lavinia* sent Mrs. Todd* in 1884 (PF116). Nonetheless, it seems that Dickinson never wrote to Emerson, went to see him in Boston, or talked to him while he was in Amherst.

DICKINSON: COMPARISON AND CONTRAST TO TRANSCENDENTALISTS

Although several borrowings from Emerson show through in Dickinson's work, the parallels have been judged by various scholars as parodies or inversions rather than imitations. However, contemporary readers may have

seen little difference: when Helen Hunt Jackson (one of Dickinson's girlhood friends and lifelong correspondent) anonymously published Dickinson's "Success" the poem was attributed to Emerson.

A. Like the Transcendentalists, Dickinson sought a transcendent knowledge and rejected system and argument in favor of intuition. But while Transcendentalism addressed an impersonal higher reality, Dickinson, rooted in latter-day Puritanism, addressed a personal God directly and questioned his authority.

B. Moreover, her Nature is more treacherous and unpredictable, providing only transitory moments of ecstasy or insight. Although the natural world may sometimes convey a feeling of safety, this will be followed by hostility.

C. While the Transcendentalists believed that they could read and understand the symbolic significance of nature, it was thoroughly ambivalent for Dickinson. She could not share the movement's moral idealism: while the Transcendental writers found a justification for evil, Dickinson took agony to be the price paid for each moment of ecstasy.

D. Some of Dickinson's nature poems restate Transcendentalists attitudes about the mystical bond between man and nature and nature's ability to reveal to man truths about humankind and the universe. But this is a small part of her poetry.

E. Most of her work is not in the Transcendental mood: some poems affirm an unbreachable separation between man and nature; others merely show delight in the variety and spectacle of nature. She substituted passing insights and ambivalence for the Transcendentalists' orphic vision and assurances.

F. Both Emerson and Dickinson were rebellious, creative, and primarily concerned with humanity's relation to God and nature, regarding natural signs as symbols of what lay beyond them. However, Dickinson did not share Emerson's optimism. While he spoke of "nature," she spoke of a gothic "landscape"; and while for Emerson the interpretation of natural signs brings the perceiver closer to the benevolent Oversoul, to Dickinson it revealed the presence of an awe-inspiring God. Where one recognized the moral justification of everything, the other experienced painful doubt. For both writers, however, the soul was consciousness and had to catch the ecstasy of the irrecoverable moment. W

G. While Emerson's poetic circles reached outward, Dickinson's mostly plunged inward. Since Emerson believed in man's capacity to deduce meaning from signs, his language clarifies and liberates, while Dickinson's reveals the ambiguity of signs and the predicament of the preceiver.

DICKINSON AND PROPHECY IN THE TRANSCENDENTALIST TRADITION:

Understood as a *truth-telling* and *visionary mode*, prophecy in the antebellum (pre-Civil War) years deeply interested New Englanders, including Emily Dickinson.

Dickinson and her contemporaries encountered it both as oratory and as literature, most notably by Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman, but also by preachers, political speakers, and others. The imminence of the Civil War encouraged a rhetoric of apocalypse as orators often questioned the purity of the nation and spoke of war as God's judgment. Surrounded by a host of orators and self-proclaimed prophets, Dickinson responded with a wisdom literature of her own making. She drew on the prophetic tradition she knew best, the Judeo-Christian one, to claim both religious and poetic authority.

A. Prophecy forms the center of Transcendentalist poetics. According to Emerson, the poet's office consists of articulating the spiritual facts of earthly existence, with the effect of emancipating humanity through the poet's sublime vision.

But the Romantic idea of the poet as prophet derives from classical and biblical models. Prophecy forms the largest body of writings in the Bible--those of the Old Testament prophets as well as John's Book of Revelation in the New Testament--and also forms the largest body of poetry in the Scriptures. Along with the wisdom literature of the Bible (e.g., the Book of Proverbs), these writings may be the most significant single rhetorical influence on Dickinson's art. Indeed, the Judeo-Christian prophetic tradition more broadly defined as including Scripture as well as the evangelical preaching of Dickinson's day (which extended the scriptural prophetic tradition into contemporary times) profoundly informed Dickinson's art, even as she drew on it to challenge aspects of evangelical dogma.

B. The notion of prophecy thus links many of Dickinson's contexts--historical, literary, rhetorical, religious--and, in fact, clarifies how Dickinson probably saw her own art. We hear her prophetic voice particularly in the proverbial statements that usually open her poems. But her poetry of prophecy goes beyond that to express the stance, style, structures, and themes of Judeo-Christian prophets.

C. Understanding Dickinson's poetry as prophecy explains her choice of "slantness" or indirection as a poetic technique, as she, like the scriptural

prophets, positioned herself on the margins of her community yet directed her words to it. Like Isaiah and Christ before her, she spoke to "those who have ears to hear" and seemed to write her poetry out of an inner compulsion to speak truth.

D. Prophecy as poetry also helps to explain the spoken quality of Dickinson's verse and Dickinson's choice of song for her poetry: the most notable female prophet of the Bible, Miriam, is known for having sung her prophecy rather than offered a jeremiad.

The struggle to find and manipulate a rhetorical form through which to express a religious vision links Dickinson to other American women "prophets" who were disallowed the public platform because of cultural constraints against women's public prophetic speech: Anne Hutchinson, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Sarah Grimke, and possibly the myriad female devotional poets of Dickinson's day. Indeed, in that time, a number of influential women spoke to women's special predilection to prophesy – not only Margaret Fuller but also the conservatively religious Lydia Maria Child and Sarah Josepha Hale. In the context of female oratory, male preaching, romantic poetry, and the Scriptures, Dickinson crafted her own understanding of the female seer who condemns superficiality and hypocrisy but also consoles, sings, and wonders, adjusting the terms to faith to a new vision of spirituality.

SOME SELECTED POEMS: (Poems are untitled, referred to by their first lines, and dated [by Johnson] according to development of Dickinson's handwriting):

1. # 185 "Faith" is a fine invention (1860)
 2. # 214 I taste a liquor never brewed-- (1860)
 3. # 258 There is a certain Slant of light (1861)
 4. # 324 Some keep the Sabbath going to Church (1860/64)
 5. # 341 After Great Pain, a formal feeling comes-- (1862)
 6. # 501 This World is not Conclusion. (1862)
 7. # 1129 Tell all the Truth but tell it slant-- (1868)
 8. # 1051 A Word made Flesh is seldom (N/A)
-

RECOMMENDED READING: (no particular order)

Paul J. Ferlazzo, "*Emily Dickinson*"; Clark Griffith, *The Long Shadow: Emily Dickinson's Tragic Poetry*; Hyatt H. Waggoner, "*Emily Dickinson: The Transcendent Self*"; Cynthia Griffin Wolff, *Emily Dickinson*. Beth Maclay Doriani, *Emily Dickinson, Daughter of Prophecy*; Murray Roston. *Prophet and Poet: The Bible and the Growth of Romanticism*. Joanne Feit Diehl, "*Emerson, Dickinson, and the Abyss*"; Karl Keller, *The Only Kangaroo Among the Beauty: Emily Dickinson and America*, ch. 6; Roland Hagenbuchle, "*Sign and Process: the Concept of Language in Emerson and Dickinson*"; James E. Mulqueen, "*Is Emerson's Work Central to the Poetry of Emily Dickinson?*"; David Porter, *Dickinson: The Modern Idiom*.

“To be a flower is profound responsibility” [# 1058 c. 1865 Johnson; Franklin # 1038]: Flower Imagery in Emily Dickinson’s Life and Poetry

By Dr. S. Coghill

Paper delivered at the “Emily Lives” Conference, Bettendorf, Iowa May 15, 2004, on the occasion of the 118th anniversary of Dickinson’s death (E.D. 1831-1886) and the dedication of a garden in her honor

1058 (1865 Johnson) (#1038 Franklin)

Bloom – is Result – to meet a Flower
And casually glance
Would cause one scarcely to suspect
The minor Circumstance

Assisting in the Bright Affair
So intricately done
Then offered as a Butterfly

To the Meridian –

To pack the Bud – oppose the Worm –
Obtain it's right of Dew –
Adjust the Heat – elude the Wind –
Escape the prowling Bee –

Great Nature not to disappoint
Awaiting Her that Day –
**To be a Flower, is profound
Responsibility --**

Prefacing Remarks: I am honored to be here today. Thank you to (1) Hedy Hustedde (Information Librarian at the Bettendorf Public Library) for all her work in writing & securing the funding for this occasion and organizing all of

the events. (2) Also thank you to the Master Gardeners Sue Laimans, Marilyn Buehl and Duane Gissel—especially Sue, for organizing the local Master Gardeners in the effort to plant the garden in honor of Emily Dickinson and make sure all the right plants were obtained for it. (3) Rebecca Wee (Quad-City poet Laureate from Augustana College) for reading a Dickinson poem at the Garden Dedication

And I know Hedy will have thanked them, but again, since this event involved so many people, they need to be publicly acknowledged – and more than once: I would also like to thank the following for their involvement and efforts

The Winning Poets: First Place: Second Place: Third Place:
Honorable Mention

John Resch: “Emily Dickinson Blues” original composition

Bruce Walters: designed the brochure & list of ED’s flowers

Connie Ghinazzi: leading a mystery book discussion (*Quiter than sleep: A Modern Emily Dickinson Mystery*).

Dee Canfield: leading a discussion of Emily Dickinson poems.

John Ketner will sculpt a bust (?) [pending funding]

Ann Boaden: performing an original monologue (with the characters of ED and Louisa May Alcott).

Kathy Wierzba: organizing the painted lady butterfly release in the garden.

May 15th – Emily Dickinson’s death: It might seem a little morbid to begin with Dickinson’s funeral I will since that is why we are here today. A friend of the Dickinson family, Mabel Loomis Todd gives a first-hand account of Emily Dickinson’s funeral: there was the "dainty, white casket ' which was " lifted by six Irish workmen "' [who] carried her **through the fields, full of buttercups**, while the friends "' followed on irregularly through the fern footpaths to the little [West] cemetery.»

Thomas Wentworth Higginson [ed. Of Atlantic Monthly & posthumous editor for ED’s poems with ML Todd] wrote that "E.D.’s face (was) a wondrous restoration of youth - she is (55) and looked 30, not a gray hair or wrinkle, and perfect peace on the beautiful brow. There was **a little bunch of violets** at the neck ... the sister **Vinnie put in two heliotropes** by her hand 'to take to Judge Lord.' I read a poem by Emily Bronte. How large a portion of the people who have interested me have passed away. » The “violets,” one of the first Spring flowers of Amherst, are no accident. In the 19th C. violets were woodland flowers signaling Spring & renewal and became intensely hybridized as exotic hothouse flowers. In Dickinson’s time, Farr notes that:

“‘pansy’ and ‘violet’ were terms used indiscriminately. The flower itself, hardy, fragrant, appealing and richly colored, grew close to the ground from springtime until frost. By 1847, it was an emblem of sincerity as well as modest circumspection...Not only did Dickinson seek out violets in woods as a child; her poems often represent her as small and timid, ‘the slightest in the House,’ who takes ‘the smallest Room,’ as if she herself were a type of the ‘meekest flower of the mead’ like the violet that she loved to praise.” (F 473,147, Farr, p. 82)

Dickinson studied Botany at Amherst Academy (her main textbook was Almira H. Lincoln’s *Familiar lectures on Botany*, 1815, and contained a short chapter on “The Symbolic Language of Flowers”), so she “knew her chemistries.” **Perhaps her preference for violets** was connected to the fact that like herself “(with her secret garden nook from which, unnoticed, she could watch passersby), violets **prefer hidden spots, and like the poet who**

celebrated the superiority of solitary endeavor, they are able, once naturalized, to cultivate themselves.” (Farr, p. 84).

Also, Dickinson’s obituary, written by her sister-in-law Susan Gilbert Dickinson and published in *The Springfield Republican*, May 18, 1886, emphasizes her housekeeping arts and horticultural skills as her genius for poetry, along with emphasizing **Emily’s eagerness to send gifts of flowers** to neighbors. Thus, if Emily was considered by some difficult to understand in some ways, her love for gardening was not. Susan Gilbert wrote **[Condense/Skip if cut for time]:**

“The death of Miss Emily Dickinson, daughter of the late Edward Dickinson, at Amherst on Saturday, makes another sad inroad on the small circle so long occupying the family mansion....Very few in the village, except among the older inhabitants, knew Miss Emily personally, although the facts of her seclusion and intellectual brilliancy were familiar Amherst traditions. **There are many houses among all classes into which treasures of fruit and flowers were constantly sent,** that will forever miss those evidences of her unselfish consideration.One can only speak of ‘duties beautifully done’; of her **gentle tillage of the rare flowers filling her conservatory [which her father had especially built for her in and which was finally torn down in 1915],** into which, as into the heavenly Paradise, entered nothing that could defile, and which was ever abloom in frost and sunshine, so well she knew her chemistries.” [see Judith Farr, *The Passion of Emily Dickinson*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992, pp. 9-11]

More than a convention of 19th Century gentility or commemoration, these references to flowers honored what others recognized as important to Dickinson. As Judith Farr observes in her recent book *The Gardens of Emily Dickinson* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Mass. 2004):

“During her lifetime, Emily Dickinson was known more widely as a gardener...than as a poet. Susan Dickinson’s unfulfilled plan for a memoir of her sister-in-law listed ‘**Love of flowers’ as Emily’s first attribute.** Her poetry...privately ‘published,’ was often enclosed in **letters pinned together by flowers, or in bouquets that made the poem concealed at the flowers’ center and the flowers themselves one message.**” (3)

In the 19th C. there are numerous puns about “**poesies**” and “**poems**” and Dickinson herself often equated the two. Farr states:

“An understanding of the importance to [Dickinson] of flowers in general and specific flowers in particular enriches the understanding of Emily Dickinson’s life and art. **She herself defined her flowers and her poems as related gifts of the Muse** [see Dorothy Huff Oberhaus’ *Emily Dickinson’s Fascicles: Method and Meaning*, U Park. PA, Pennsylvania State U. Press, 1995, p. 180 – she regards “flower” as a “trope” for the word “poem,” declaring that in some instances the poet “blurs the distinction between both herself and her poems, and herself and her flowers.”]

Flowers & Plants in her poetry (and letters):

19 (1858 Johnson) Franklin # 25

A sepal, petal, and a thorn
Upon a common summer's morn—
A flask of Dew—A Bee or two—
A Breeze—a caper in the trees—
And I'm a Rose!

137 (1859 Johnson) Franklin # 95

Flowers -- Well -- if anybody
Can the ecstasy define --
Half a transport -- half a trouble --
With which flowers humble men:
Anybody find the fountain
From which floods so contra flow --
I will give him all the Daisies
Which upon the hillside blow.

Too much pathos in their faces
For a simple breast like mine --
Butterflies from St. Domingo
Cruising round the purple line --
Have a system of aesthetics --
Far superior to mine.

945 (1864 Johnson) Franklin # 1112)

This is a Blossom of the Brain –
A small – italic Seed
Lodged by Design or Happening
The Spirit fructified –

Shy as the Wind of his Chambers
Swift as a Freshet's Tongue
So of the Flower of the Soul
It's process is unknown --

When it is found, a few rejoice
The Wise convey it Home
Carefully cherishing the spot
If other Flower become –

When it is lost, that Day shall be
The Funeral of God,
Open his Breast, a closing Soul
The Flower of Our Lord –

Dickinson called her poems “Blossoms of the Brain” (# 945 J; F 1112) Whether we are looking at the 1775 poems dated early or late in Dickinson's career, imagery of flowers and plants is pervasive. Sohoko Hamada states: “of Dickinson's] poems [that] refer to flowers [the best estimate is] about one out of ten.” (Sahoko Hamada, “*Emily Dickinson's Flower Imagery*” ; paper delivered at the 19th General Meeting of the Emily Dickinson Society of Japan, Notre Dame Seishin University, June 21, 2003, pp.81-89.). And that is just the poetry. In Dickinson's 1,100 letters, references to plants, plantings, flowers, flowers in poems and nature imagery

are constant [looking through the Collected Letters recently to refresh my memory about this, I noted related references in almost every letter – this could be is a paper by itself—but that’s another conference!].

As Paula Bennett notes in *An Emily Dickinson Encyclopedia* (edited by Jane Donahue Eberwein Greenwood Press, Westport, CT, 1998, pp. 116-17)

Not only is flower imagery among the most pervasive image patterns in Dickinson's writing, but for Dickinson (as for most middle-class women of her period), the care and feeding of flowers were themselves a supremely important component of life. As a young woman she kept an herbarium, which, still extant, is distinguished for its beautiful and careful arrangement. As an adult, she maintained a conservatory, growing exotic flowers despite New England's forbidding weather. Summers, she, like her mother and sister, worked in the garden' outdoors. In her 1894 memoir of Dickinson, Emily Fowler' Ford recalled her in that garden, "a flower herself" (Richard Sewall's *Life* 376).

When Dickinson's writes about flowers, she is less subtle, more pungent and not at all “feminine” in the sense most of us connect flowers and females in the 19th C. To a friend, she wrote, "**Expulsion from Eden grows indistinct in the presence of flowers so blissful, and with no disrespect to Genesis, Paradise remains**" (Johnson, *Letters* #552). Flowers were, it seems, as close as she could come to heaven' on earth, and, conversely, she had no use for "a Redemption that excluded them" (Letter #528). Given the large role flowers played in Dickinson's life, it is not surprising that floral references appear ubiquitously in her writing. As mentioned above, frequent references to flowers in the letters support the fact that they were fundamental to her daily life, the activities she engaged in, and the gifts (often a single bloom) she gave.

Extending Hamada's estimate, Bennett says:

“In the poems there are approximately 400 references to flowers or their parts, such as ‘stem’ and ‘sepal.’ The range of flowers to which she referred is unusually broad, even for her flower-obsessed period, covering wildflowers as well as cultivated blooms. **But the rose was for her, as it has been for most poets in the Western literary tradition, the poetic flower of choice, appearing in over twice as many poems as its nearest competitor, the daisy**--this despite the fact

that Dickinson called herself "Daisy" in a number of important texts, including the "Master" letters.

Like other American women poets of the period, Dickinson deployed flower imagery figuratively in a wide variety of ways. Flower images encoded references to poetry' and the poetic process, to individuals and to generic human beings, to Jesus' and the soul, to Eden and bliss, and, perhaps most important, to woman and the female essence, so these images substantially contribute to the notorious ambiguity' of her writings.

A Numerical Approach: Dickinson was a close observer of Nature and its inhabitants:

According to *A Concordance to the Poems of Emily Dickinson* (Stanford P. Rosenbaum, editor, Cornell University Press, 1964):

General: Blooms, Flowers, Nature

26 poems use the words: bloom, blooming, or blooms

26 poems use the words: blossom or blossoms (I uses A'blossom)

112 poems use the words: flower, flowers or flower's

151 poems use the words: nature, nature's [though not every one of these is about vegetative nature—most of them though]; 3 mention bouquets.

Specific Flowers: Daffodil, Daisy, Rose, Violet etc

6 poems mention dandelions

9 poems mention violets,

10 buttercups

13 poems mention daffodils

27 poems mention daisies

80 poems mention roses [about 6-8 of these use the word "rose" as a verb]

20 mention clover

2 mention hyacinth, 5 lilacs, 8 lillies, 12 buds,

Other: 196 mention birds, 86 bees, 48 butterflies, 8 snakes

137 (Johnson, about 1859) Check the Franklin edition: # 95

Flowers -- Well -- if anybody
Can the ecstasy define --
Half a transport -- half a trouble --
With which **flowers** humble men:
Anybody find the fountain
From which floods so contra flow --
I will give him all the **Daisies**
Which upon the hillside blow.

Too much pathos in their faces
For a simple breast like mine --
Butterflies from St. Domingo
Cruising round the purple line --
Have a system of aesthetics --
Far superior to mine.

[**Condense?**] "Flowers-Well-if anybody" (J #137) demonstrates that publication of Dickinson's work during her lifetime was wider than previously assumed. The poem appeared in *Drum Beat*, 2 March 1864, and was reprinted in both the *Springfield Republican* and the *Boston Post*. Poems #130 and #228 were also found in *Drum Beat*, causing their discoverer, Karen Dandurand (Dandurand, "New Dickinson Civil War Publications, in *American Literature* 56, 1984: 17-27) to conclude that it was Dickinson's own reticence rather than editorial perplexity [which is what T.W. Higginson often expresses in letters to his wife when writing about Dickinson's poetry] that explains her failure to publish more widely. Beyond its unique history, # 137 illustrates a use of common expression (the

only instance of Dickinson's using "Well" as an intimate address and opening) as well as the oxymoron in "Half a transport-half a trouble." She challenges "anybody" (later specified as male) to define "the exstasy" and offers "all the Daisies I Which upon the hillside blow" should such a task be accomplished.

Dickinson often described daisies as "modest," "low," or "small," particularly in contrast to powerful persons or forces such as a lord or the sun, and since ecstasy enables "flowers [to] humble men," the poem may shed light on Dickinson's sense of herself as a woman poet challenging traditional hierarchies and *its methods of interpreting the world and its natural phenomenon* [emphasis mine]. The daisies also echo the "Daisy" persona of her "Master" letters [see attached] the earliest of which is estimated to have been written in the late 1850s, around the time of this poem. Defining ecstasy is equated with finding the source of floods (an untamable and often erotic or creative force in **poems #530 and #861**) whose "flow" is alliteratively connected with the flowers.

The poem takes on further appeal to the senses with the "purple line" suggestive of love, "butterflies "symbolic of the beloved, and "St. Domingo," which Patterson interprets as "symbolizing the South of erotic happiness and freedom." Ecstasies of flowers and butterflies surpass systems of aesthetics or attempts at definition. Many scholars see this as evidence of Dickinson's perception of the connection between "nature" and humanity. **As in poem # 97**, where "My flowers turn from Forums / Yet eloquent declare / What Cato could'nt prove," Dickinson illustrates the ineffectiveness of "Philosophy" or other typically logical ways of interpreting the world when it comes to expressing the inexpressible. (**For other discussions** of this see: Fascicle 4: Rebecca Patterson, *Emily Dickinson's Imagery*; William Sherwood, *Circumference and Circumstance*; and related essays in *The Emily Dickinson Handbook* edited by Gudrun Grabher, Roland Hagenbuchle, and Christanne Miller, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998).

Other later poems (later than 1859) in which Dickinson uses the "daisy" reference include **# 921 and # 1232** and these employ more oblique contexts.

921 (1864 Johnson) Franklin # 184
If it had no pencil

Would it try mine – Worn – now – and *dull* -- sweet,
Writing much to thee.
If it had no word,
Would it make the **Daisy**,
Most as big as I was,
When it plucked me?

#1232 (1872 Johnson) Franklin #

The **Clover's** simple Fame
Remembered of the Cow –
Is better than enameled Realms
Of notability.
Renown perceives itself
And that degrades the Flower –
The **Daisy** that has looked behind
Has compromised its power --

The “Daisy” reference in # 921 is notable for the speaker’s correlation between herself and size (“small” as word and trope shows up in 82 times Dickinson’s poems): “Would it make the Daisy / Most as big as I was.” Judith Farr makes the interesting observation that “[like Wordsworth and the Romantic poets’ fondness for smaller flowers] like the crocus, anemone, clover or daisy [were] all the more precious because they are confidingly, vulnerably, democratically available to all.” (Farr 110). However, while Poem # 921 draws the size paradigm between “Daisy” and writing, and since we do not know to whom the speaker addresses the question of the poem or the “it” of the first line, we only know the “I” and the “Daisy” are imagined as the same figurative size – implying a humble smallness not distinctive enough to draw anyone’s attention. **But this very sense of “smallness” seems part of the charm of this poem because the “Daisy” becomes a substitute for Logos or the logical system of expression through language as if nature writes us messages through flowers, which the speaker of the poem sees as the better substitute when language fails or has become “dull.”**

In # 1232 we have references to both the humble clover and daisy. Here the lowly, small and humble aspects of such prevalent spring and early summer plants is treated first ironically then meditatively. The “cow” remembers the “Clover’s simple Fame” and perhaps ruminates [i.e. eats] it contemplatively, recalling all the spring clover it has feasted on in the past.

This gives way to the self-regarding egotism of “Renown [that] perceives itself” which subsequently has a diminishing effect on the “Daisy that has looked behind [and] / Has compromised its power.” **Or as my students (in the Dickinson-Whitman seminar) point out, the cow is neither thinking nor meditating on its snack of juicy clover. It is appreciating its meal of clover with Zen-like emptiness of Self by not regarding itself at all.** And daisies gain their natural power by just “being,” only “compromising [their] power” if they become self-conscious enough to “look behind” -- or to past seasons of daisies for comparison to their present state. This would imply dependence on hierarchies and rubrics of judgment that “degrade” the daisy’s very state of just being itself. Thus Dickinson asserts the value of simple, small presences that are important just for their existence but do not impose themselves on the world nor any elaborate system of interpreting the world in which they exist.

Roses: # 44 (1858 Johnson) Franklin # 60

If she had been the **Mistletoe**
And I had been the Rose –
How gay upon your table
My velvet life to close –
Since I am of the Druid,
And she is of the dew –
I’ll deck Tradition’s buttonhole –
And send the **Rose** to you.

46 (1858 Johnson) Franklin # 63

I keep my pledge,
I was not called –
Death did not notice me.
I bring my Rose.
I plight again,
By every sainted Bee –
By Daisy called from hillside –
By Bobolink from lane.
Blossom and I –
Her oath, and mine –
Will surely come again.

334 (1862 Johnson) Franklin # 380

All the letters I can write
Are not as fair as this –
Syllables of Velvet –
Sentences of Plush,
Depths of Ruby, undrained,
Hid, Lip, for Thee –

1582 (1883 Johnson) Franklin # 1610

Where **Roses** would not dare to go,
What heart would risk the way –
And so I send my **Crimson Scouts**
To sound the Enemy –

The 1840 Otis A. Bullard portrait of the Dickinson children (Austin, the oldest, in the middle; Lavinia, the youngest on the right, and Emily, the second oldest, on the left) shows Emily Dickinson holding an open book with a rose on the open pages. This was a painterly convention in the 19th Century. While Dickinson does more often express either charm or intensity of observation about humbler flowers such as the daisy, the violet, the gentian or even clover, she invokes the rose more often but more conventionally. Dickinson had roses in her garden and refers to them frequently in her poetry. Dickinson's roses were had what are referred to as Old Roses, or Gallica roses (which Dickinson referred to as "calico" roses), or for those of you who know what David Austin roses are, they were similar to these. Old Roses are known both for their thorny canes but also for their heady fragrance and used her own observations variously. Farr reflects other scholars' consensus that "the rose [Dickinson] regards as a classic emblem of love and the transience of beauty, but it does not move her to more than praise (explicit or implicit) of a traditional character." (Farr, 188).

For example, Dickinson uses roses as traditional symbols for pledges of fidelity or friendship as in # 44 and 46 : "I'll deck Tradition's buttonhole – / And send the **Rose** to you." and "I keep my pledge... / **I bring my Rose.** / " And elsewhere she uses them as typical emblem of love as well as the hazards love entails, as in # 1582 : "Where **Roses** would not dare to go, /

What heart would risk the way – “ making them her “**Crimson Scouts**” sent ahead, which are safer than actually hazarding one’s own person to suffer intense feeling directly. Dickinson even employs synecdoche, artfully substituting parts of the rose for parts of letters or even speech (in # 334) : **Syllables of Velvet – / Sentences of Plush, / Depths of Ruby,** “ which the speaker sees as more “fair” than “All the letters I can write” because they are “undrained.” And only once does Dickinson seem to directly compare herself to a rose after direct contact with nature (# 19) : “And I’m a Rose.”

Even though, as Farr asserts, “the daisy, anemone, violet, gentian, and other woodland flowers *interest* [Dickinson] more” her perception of the rose, especially its scent, is something to be “experienced ‘Abstemiously” (Franklin 806) because it is the sum of all scents, the very essence of beauty.” (Farr 190). **Because of its natural allure as well as its hidden danger, the rose was a flower to be respected in Dickinson’s poetic language.**

Violets: # 14, 32, 90, 469, 611, 641, 722, 830 (Johnson).

469 (about 1862, Johnson) Franklin # 603

The Red – Blaze – is the Morning –
The Violet – is Noon –
The Yellow – Day – is falling –
And after that – is non –

But Miles of Sparks – at Evening –
Reveal the Width that burned –
The Territory Argent – that
Never yet – consumed –

611 (about 1862, Johnson), Franklin # 442

I see thee better – in the Dark –
I do not need a Light –
The love of Thee – a Prism be –
Excelling Violet –

I see thee better for thee Years
That hunch themselves between –
The Minder's Lamp – sufficient be –
To nullify the Mine –

And in the Grave – I see Thee best –
Its little Panels be
Aglow – All ruddy – with the Light
I held so high, for Thee –

What need of Day –
To Those whose Dark – hath so—surpassing Sun –
It deem it be – Continually –
At the Meridian?

722 (about 1863, Johnson) Franklin # 745

Sweet Mountains – Ye tell Me no lie –
Never deny Me – Never fly –
Those same unvarying Eyes
Turn on Me – when I fail – or feign,
Or take the Royal names in van –
Their far – slow – **Violet Gaze** –

My Strong **Madonnas** – Cherish still –
The Wayward Nun – beneath the Hill –
Whose service – is to You –
Her latest Worship – When the Day
Fades from the Firmament away –
To Lift Her Brows on You --

In Romantic poetry there are many tributes to small flowers because of their proximity to the earth, their contained beauty, their associations with Spring and their ubiquitous commonality (being humble and plain). In 19th C. American poetry, flower poems by Thoreau, Emerson or William Cullen Bryant, “(whose ‘To a Fringed Gentian’ is marked in Dickinson’s copy of his poems) demonstrate, like Wordsworth’s [flower poems], a fondness for the very smallness of the flowers they praise.” (Farr, 113). Indeed, this affection is often seen in women’s poetry of the time, especially popular in

the Sentimental tradition of Mrs. Lydia Sigourney or Susan Fenimore Cooper, in which small flowers are tropes for the fleetingness & inherent beauty of children & childhood as well as reminders of an unseen Creator.

For Dickinson, violets, like robins, heralded Spring. On p. 46 of her herbarium Dickinson preserved eight (8) types of pansy-violets along with a clipping of trumpet creeper and prickly cucumber. She preserved these types of violets: *Viola palmate*, *viola pubescens*, *Viola tricolor*, *Viola pudata*, *Viola rotundifolia*, *Viola cuccullata*, and *Viola blanda*.

Her fondness for pansy-violets is well known and well documented. As Farr points out:

Emily Dickinson once promised Samuel Bowles [editor of *The Springfield Republican*], when he was ill, ‘Estates of Violet – Trouble ne’er looked on!’ ...Violets were especially precious to her because their loveliness came up in meadows often ‘unsuspected’ or unseen or too late (Franklin #272, 69). On her ‘estate,’ even violets encountered trouble. Indeed, so vulnerable could they seem to her that ultimately she translates them into the purple hue of heaven or the violet color of noon or the deep blue haze over the mountains at evening. (Farr, 119).

As Farr goes on to discuss Dickinson’s fondness for violets, she notes about page 46 in the herbarium that:

This page is one of the most artistically conceived...the differences in leaf shape and flower size imparting a sense of variety and plenitude. Even as “Daisy” was the wildflower Dickinson later chose when describing herself as the loving friend of Samuel Bowles, her ‘Sun,’ the violet appears in her first tribute to Susan Dickinson, in whose dark eyes, she wrote in 1858, ‘the Violets lie / Moldered’ for many Mays—a fine Dickinsonian instance of courtly imagery (Letter 197). (Farr, 119).

Some scholars (Domhall Mitchell, Alfred Habegger Betsy Erkkila)

discuss what they see as Dickinson's "aristocratic" tendencies for a woman of her class and time in her affection for flowers. But Dickinson "traced her affection for violets and dandelions to her rustic nature" (Farr 125). Even before she went to Mount Holyoke (Mary Lyons' seminary for girls), and

before she made the herbarium as an adolescent schoolgirl, she walked the woods

with her mother, brother and sister. [and as Lavinia recalls] 'When we were little

children...we used to spend entire days in the woods hunting for treasures.' The

Dickinson children were country people whose study of wildflowers began long

Before their training in Edward Hitchcock's botanical principles. (Farr 125).

Thus it is no accident that when she died, and as she requested, as Thomas Wentworth Higginson records, she "was a perfect peace,...and there was **a little bunch of violets** at [her] neck."

To Conclude: From the *Emily Dickinson Encyclopedia*:

{Condense if running over time}: Dickinson won recognition as a nature poet even in her lifetime, as newspaper editors demonstrated by titling poems "October," "Sunset," and "The Snake"; and all three editions of the 1890s included sections on "Nature." Readers felt comfortable with subject matter typically chosen by other nineteenth-century Women poets and by Romantics generally. Dickinson's poems treat flowers," birds," insects," animals, seasons," and times of day, usually from a domestic perspective reflecting observations in the garden and home conservatory or from the Homestead windows. Nature to her remained a "mystery," a "haunted house," and a force that was both exquisitely dear and radically strange (# 1400).

Dickinson...used **gardens as microcosms of nature,' analogies of heaven,' and representations of her soul, home,' and New England culture.** The gardens in Dickinson's poems are **relatively safe and small places** where

speakers can experience a tamed nature and contemplate a flower,' bind,' or shadow or even "keep the Sabbath" (# 324). As the locus of both delight and loss, the garden serves as a setting for musing on the sublime' and fallen mortal world and imagining the immortal.'

The **natural and supernatural mingle in gardens under the hand** and gaze of Dickinson's speakers. Dickinson's **figurative gardens that she names Paradise and Eden recall and revise the narratives of Creation and the Fall in Genesis** as well as the new heaven of Revelation. Her poems often contemplate the nature of God' and the gender relations he established in the paradise that Adam and Eve lost and also the nature of the paradise to be regained in heaven.

Yet Dickinson often found paradise, Eden, and heaven on earth: she declared to Austin' that Amherst' "seems indeed to be a bit of Eden" (Letter 59), and poem # 1408 states that "**Earth is Heaven.**" She knew that her Puritan' ancestors had struggled to create a Christian paradise in the New World. The Dickinson family garden, which she called "my Puritan Garden" (Letter 685) and "Vinnie's' sainted Garden" (L 885), offered privacy yet also means of keeping in touch with the wider world. She often sent flowers and produce, along with a letter poem, to friends' and neighbors. In the glass-walled, south facing conservatory that her father built for her off his study, which she called "the garden off the dining-room" (Letter 279), she brought plants and poems to life.

To Emily Dickinson, the...**daisy** represented faithful devotion; the **gentian**, determination, ability, industry in the face of difficulty and scorn; the **violet**, modesty and fidelity; the lily, hallowed beauty; the trailing **arbutus**, affection and pluck; the **aster** (as she wrote to Samuel Bowles), the 'everlasting fashion' of eternity (# 374 F); the **rose**, romance and/or conjugal joy. Humble flowers like the...arbutus, daffodil, or crocus, which struggle courageously against soil hardened by winter and associate themselves with blessed spring and the advent of the royal season of summer, inspired Dickinson to write poems of praise and empathy.These flowers reminded her of her own need, as a poet and a woman, for courage. (Farr, p. 191).

Flowers were for Dickinson living poems and she transposed their beauty into her own work. In fact she immortalized them in her poetry though every season brought their recurring reminders of the promise of spring, the

lingering tropic of summer and the fleeting beauty concluded in autumn and put to cold sleep by winter. Dickinson's garden in summer was an extension of the artists' "studio" of her own home. Her close observations of woodland flowers, the migratory patterns of birds and butterflies, represented the world as well as the soul in world (perhaps even proving "The brain is wider than the sky" (# 556 J; F # 598). **These things provided the "seed and soil" metaphors (# 862 F) that brought forth the flower of poetry from the garden of her imagination.**

She took it seriously. She took it as "profound responsibility."

NOTES:

Dickinson's glass conservatory: Built by her father for her on the south side of the Homestead after 1855 facing High Street. It was torn down in 1915. The Dickinson Trust plans to reconstruct the conservatory some day and to grow the flowers in it that Dickinson had, including the jasmine, which was the first flower she grew there (and writes often mentions in her letters).

Dickinson's Herbarium: Herbariums of pressed leaves and flowers were a standard 19th Century methods for botany to young students so that they learned to identify not just the parts of plants but the names of plants and flowers themselves. Dickinson's herbarium includes over 400 plants from the Amherst region, and is preserved in the Emily Dickinson Room of the Houghton Rare Book Library at Harvard. Visitors can also see photo-facsimiles of various pages in the Houghton Library. There is also a facsimile of the herbarium in the dining room of the Homestead in Amherst, and one facsimile print hangs on the north wall, next to a window looking out at the back garden, in the dining room.

GARDENS AND NATURE AS SUBJECTS: See *An Emily Dickinson Encyclopedia*, edited by Jane Donahue Eberwein, Greenwood Press, 1998: Dickinson often used gardens as microcosms of nature,' analogies of heaven,' and representations of her soul, home,' and New England culture. The gardens in Dickinson's poems are relatively safe and small places where speakers can experience a tamed nature and contemplate a flower,' bind,' or

shadow or even "keep the Sabbath" (P 324). As the locus of both delight and loss, the garden serves as a setting for musing on the sublime' and fallen mortal world and imagining the immortal.'

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Paradoxes bloom in Dickinson's poetic gardens, which contain sweet and bitter, promise and loss, growth and death. The Dickinsonian garden is a place of possibilities; the "unexpected Maid" that the speaker of P I? encounters in her garden may be nature, poetry,' and the speaker herself. She cultivated a peculiar and stunning strain of Puritan, Romantic, and realistic contemplation that probed her self and her world.

RECOMMENDED: Jane Donahue Eberwein, *Dickinson: Strategies of Limitation*; Margaret Homans, *Woman Writers and Poetic Identity*; Jean McClure Mudge, *Emily Dickinson and the Image of Home*; Gary Lee Stonum, *The Dickinson Sublime*.

NATURE AS SUBJECT: Dickinson won recognition as a nature poet even in her lifetime, as newspaper editors demonstrated by titling" poems "October," "Sunset," and "The Snake"; and all three editions of the 1890s included sections on "Nature." Readers felt comfortable with subject matter typically chosen by other nineteenth-century Women" poets and by Romantics" generally. Dickinson's poems treat flowers," birds," insects,"

animals, seasons," and times of day, usually from a domestic" perspective reflecting observations in the garden" and home" conservatory or from the Homestead" windows.

She included bats, moles, and fossils in those observations, however, as well as conventionally poetic creatures, and let her imagination summon such exotic natural phenomena as tigers, volcanoes, and prairies. Among cultural influences contributing to Dickinson's interest in nature was the women's tradition of botanical drawing that encouraged detailed representation of familiar specimens. Another was science" education at Amherst Academy" and Mount Holyoke," under the influence of Edward Hitchcock" and his geological discoveries. Christian lessons Hitchcock drew from the sciences also taught Dickinson to think of nature as complementing biblical" revelation. Dickinson, who referred to her poems as "flowers," often sent verse or prose celebrations of nature to friends.

Beyond that, she sometimes employed poetry" to distill the essence of one or another natural being, as in the series of bird poems she exchanged with Helen Hunt Jackson." What may be most distinctive in her treatment of nature, however, is a tendency to focus on transitional points in natural cycles: sunrises, a particular slant of late afternoon winter light, or Indian summer, She wrote of buried bulbs with their promise of renewal, of butterflies bursting from Cocoons, but also of flowers yielding to frost.

Thus poems classified by editors as dealing with "Nature" can generally be read equally well as speculations on "Time and Eternity." In using nature imagery to probe death's mysteries and the prospect of immortality, however, Dickinson avoided easy assurances, either the sentimentally romantic ones of feminine verse or the Christian ones she had been taught to expect. Nature, to her, remained a "mystery," a "haunted house," and a force that was both exquisitely dear and radically strange (P 1400).

RECOMMENDED: Life; Paula Bennet, *Emily Dickinson: Woman Poet*, Jane Donahue Eberwein, *Dickinson: Strategies of Limitation*; Jean Mudge, *Emily Dickinson and the Image of Home*; Cynthia Griffin Wolff, *Emily Dickinson*.

Edwin Marsh and the Funeral Of Emily Dickinson: When Edwin Marsh died in December, 1913, his passing, like Emily's father's was front page news. He was described as "warm hearted man" and the "best-liked man" in

Amherst. A gregariousness contributed to his double life as a furniture dealer and as Amherst's most prominent undertaker. Marsh's most famous funeral was that of Emily Dickinson.

The "E.D. Marsh Furniture and Carpet Rooms" faced the Amherst Common on Main Street, not far from the Dickinson Homestead. The business was the largest of its kind in western Massachusetts, outside of Springfield. Marsh's ads read, "Headquarters for furniture of all kinds. Parlor suites, easy chairs, lounges, chamber sets, sideboards, dining tables and chairs. Spring beds, mattresses, pillows, window shades, draperies. Brussels tapestry and ingrain carpets, mattings, rugs, oil cloths, etc., at lowest prices." One could purchase a solid mahogany Martha Washington sewing table for \$15, or a brass bed for \$11.75.

Edwin Marsh's outgoing nature led to multiple involvements in the community. He was president of the Street Sprinkling Association in 1891 (dirt roads were sprinkled to keep dust down in summer), he was one of the first directors of the Amherst Board of Trade, president of the nascent Amherst Gas Company, one of the original directors of Wildwood Cemetery in 1887, and the cemetery's treasurer and superintendent for 20 years. The latter activity takes on added significance when one notices the discreet mention in Marsh's ads that he was the town's "Funeral Director and Furnisher."

In searching for the identity of the man who buried Emily Dickinson, it makes sense to look among the local furniture makers. They sometimes made the leap from hammering together coffins in the back room, to accompanying them to the cemetery, and making arrangements for flowers and services.

Emily's niece, Martha, recalled the description of the funeral given by Marsh's assistant, Ellery Strickland. He was surprised to find the poet so young looking, "her reddish, bronze hair without a silver thread." In a letter to Martha, he wrote,

"How well I remember her passing to join the others, your mother and Mrs. Powell planning the robe... . Then the cortege across the lawn J through the hedge, across the fields, a special bier borne by faithful workmen of her father's grounds, Dennis Scanlon, Pat Ward Steven Sullivan, Dennis Cashman, Dan Moynihan, Tom Kelly."

The old Marsh account books convey the stark, business-like description of the funeral of one of the world's great poets. To this day, the date of Dickinson's funeral is marked by a procession and poetry readings at the grave, site. Individuals, pairs, small groups cluster around the wrought iron gate protecting the Dickinson family plot, contemplating Dickinson's gravestone carved with her name, her dates and the simple but eloquent inscription "Called Back."

Marsh's account states the cause of Emily's death as Bright's disease [this is on her death certificate], an illness of the kidneys. Dr. Orvis Bigelow is listed as the certifying physician, and the date of Emily's burial May 19, 1886. Perhaps the most significant fact revealed is that Emily's casket measured 5'6 a significant figure for those eager for any clue to her appearance. According to Robert Studley, regional manager of the Boston funeral corporation & Ames, Inc., the poet's height would therefore 5'2" or 5'3 .

Dickinson is legendary for dressing only in white in the latter part of her life. To this she was true even at the end, for her casket was white, it was furnished with white flannel, and had white textile handles. Though simple, the cost was an expensive \$85.00, a time when the average casket was bought for between \$12-\$35.

Before burial, Emily's casket was placed in a \$5 pine box. The cost of a flannel wrap with ribbons was \$9.25, and the making of the bier on which the casket was carried cost \$2.50. No carriages were hired, no chairs were rented or flowers bought. Yet the total cost of Emily Dickinson's funeral was \$121.75, one of the most expensive that spring.

In Amherst in the late 1800s, a pauper could be buried for \$12.50 or, as in the case of Samuel Boltwood in November of 1886, funeral costs could mount to \$423. Boltwood's casket had satin pillows, purple plush, and was fully lined in satin. There were seven bouquets of flowers, and no fewer than 13 rented carriages. The average cost of most Amherst funerals, however, was between \$25 and \$80.

Official List of Plants In Dickinson's Garden at the Dickinson Homestead From the Dickinson Homestead Trust, Amherst, MA, 1983 Amherst, MA is comprised of USDA hardiness zones 4 and 5 (and 6 in protected micro-environments

Emily Dickinson Perennial Garden Plant List

April: Bleeding heart, blood root, crocus, Dutchman's breeches, epimedium [Red Barrenroot groundcover], Jack-in-the-pulpit, lily of the valley, narcissus, primrose, Scylla, snowdrops, Solomon's seal, trillium, violets

May: Azalea, bachelor button, bleeding heart, columbine, day lily (lemon), false leopard bane, hyacinth, Jacob's ladder, Jack-in-the-pulpit, Johnny jump-ups, lilacs, lily of the valley, lupin, narcissus, primrose, rhododendron, salvia, Star of Bethlehem, tulip.

June: Anemone, bell flower, bleeding heart, columbine, coral bells, daisy, delphinium, deutzia (flowering shrub), false leopard bane, Foxglove, geranium pratense, German iris, golden maguerite, grass pinks, honeysuckle, hosta, Jacob's Ladder, lemon day lily, mock orange, mountain laurel, peony, salvia, Siberian iris, spiderwort, Star of Bethlehem, sundrops, tulip, violets, wild geranium, yarrow.

July: Anemone, balloon flower, bee balm, bell flower, butterfly weed, coral bells, coreopsis, delphinium, false dragon head, geranium pratense, globe thistle, mugwort, old fashioned climbing rose, phlox, Queen Anne's lace, salvia, Shasta daisy, spiderwort, sundrops, Sweet Sicily, tawny day lily, tiger lily, wild geranium, yarrow.

August: Balloon flower, bee balm, butterfly weed, coral bells, coreopsis, false dragon head, florist chrysanthemum, geranium pratense, globe thistle, hosta, mugwort, old fashioned rose, phlox, Queen Anne's lace, Shasta daisy, tawny day lily, tiger lily, wild geranium, yarrow.

September: Florist chrysanthemum, geranium pratense, hosta.

See Appendices with notes to myself for: Master Letters and Editions of Dickinson's poetry.

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